Running back the tape, watching it replay

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Running back the tape, watching it replay

by Faralyne

Summary

For someone ripped from their time, ripped from the few but strong relationships built by time and personal development, by self-reflection and swallowed pride, ripped from the one thing that made him feel worthwhile and needed and put-together, and forced to forge everything over again—Katsuki thinks he is handling it pretty fucking well.

Or

A villain's quirk sends a 29-year-old Bakugou back in time to his middle school days. Bakugou-centric fic. Updating tags along the way.

Notes

Hello, thanks for clicking. This fic will be quite long; I am still working out the total number of chapters. It is dependent on the manga, so there will be spoilers. Just something I was thinking about in the back of my head and decided why not?

Since Bakugou is older, he has some level of maturity. Some.

The title of each chapter is a line of song lyrics. Sometimes, a series of chapters will have different lyrics from the same song. Fic title lyrics are from "Replay" by Devvon Terrell.

There will be flashback/flashforward scenes. In this story, Katsuki went to Yuuei from 2021 to 2024.

When I wake up, I'm afraid somebody else might take my place

Chapter Notes

Section 1 out of 4: Adjusting to the Past

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katsuki wakes with a start; fists clenched and teeth gnashed. Ready to attack the masked demon that happened to get one clean shot—he blinks, confused. His legs are tied up in black bedsheets. And he is smothered by the nostalgia of his childhood room in his parent's two-story house.

"What the hell?"

Katsuki kicks off the bedsheets and swings around the side of the bed. Why is he sleeping at his parent's house? He glances at the alarm clock on his bedside table. It reads, "6:00 AM." What happened between the midnight drug bust and now?

A new and highly addictive hallucinogen hit the streets of Musutafu hard. *Collafa Spice*. People looking for a quick escape from their taxing lives instead found an express ticket to their funerals. Fortunately, after months of investigation, Katsuki of the Genius Office along with members of the Riot Agency and several underground heroes had a lead on the secret location used to manufacture the drug. The team planned to invade and secure as many high priority drug associates as possible during a covert mission masked in the night.

The last thing Katsuki remembers is coming face-to-face with the drug kingpin himself and attacking his unusually lanky bodyguard who hid his face behind a red yaksha mask and slithered around the hero's blows like a snake.

"So, this is the Number Three Hero, Dynamight, huh? The revered reputation I'm about to gain makes me almost want to thank you."

Katsuki scowls. It was only one clean hit from the bastard's bodyguard, but, apparently, he was out of commission enough to be sent to his parent's house. His scowl deepens. Why not his perfectly-equipped studio apartment? And did his parents not turn his bedroom into a home office the minute he officially moved out after he graduated from Yuuei? He is sure his mother either sold off or trashed everything he left behind.

With remembered ease, Katsuki trudges to the attached small bathroom to wash his face before demanding answers from his parents.

But the shocked face staring at him through the mirror stops him in his tracks.

Hands are a flurry over his body, touching the rounded cheeks that took years to disappear, the lack of splintered scars and haphazardly healed gashes, the fluffy hair where an undercut should be. Taking in the loss of height, muscle bulk, raw power. Everything is *wrong*.

"Oh, *god*, no." Katsuki touches the mirror in dread, willing it to be some gimmick. "No."

How did one fucking hit revert him to his baby-faced, bratty, beanpole of a middle-school body?

No wonder Best Jeanist sent him to his parent's house. Hiding this shame of a result from a top pro hero is of uttermost necessity. And, if any of his enemies learn of what he has been reduced to… he could be dead in mere moments.

Katsuki curses, slamming a fist onto the sink countertop and letting the pain in his hand ground him.

He breathes deeply.

It is not the end of the world. It was one mistake, one bad judgement call in dodging an attack, made from accumulated months of no sleep and overtime shifts. He will fix this and beat that scrawny snake into the ground along with his arrogant drug boss.

Out of nowhere, a hand grabs Katsuki's shoulder and roughly spins him around.

"What the hell is taking so long, brat? Didn't you hear me calling you?" his mother asks, her eyes narrowing. "Why aren't you dressed yet? You should've left for school already. Hurry up!"

Reflexively, Katsuki slaps the hand away, raising an eyebrows at his mother's unwarranted anger. "Have you finally lost it, old hag? I might look like this, but I've been out of school for nearly ten years."

Mitsuki looks at him like he is crazy, her perfectly-shaped eyebrows furrowing in incomprehension.

Katsuki stares at his mother's off-looking body. He knows it has been a while since he last visited his parents, but he is sure there are wrinkles on her face, maybe a couple grey hairs. This woman looks not a day over 40.

She promptly smacks him on the head. "I don't have time for your pranks, you little shit. Get going. *Now*." A wrapped bento box and a brown schoolbag are shoved into Katsuki's hands before his mother stalks from the bathroom.

An awful theory worms its way into Katsuki's mind, and he snubs it out. It was not possible. It *is* not possible. The ability to… impossible.

Deciding he needs to call his boss, Katsuki searches for his phone. Where the hell is the damn thing? Where the hell are any of his personal items? No keys, phone, wallet, sunglasses, his usual day backpack—nothing.

The persistent theory knocks on his mind once again, a little harder, and he blows it up. No, there is no way.

In a frenzy, Katsuki dumps the contents of his schoolbag onto the floor. Class binders, textbooks, and writing utensils. Lip balm. His skull-themed handkerchief. An extra set of orange chopsticks. House keys to his parent's house. A cardholder for his Aldera Junior High student ID, train pass, and emergency debit card.

Well, that makes sense because he did not own a phone in middle school.

Katsuki's heart drops painfully in his chest. Sweat drips from his palms dangerously, but his throat is devoid of even the tiniest bit of moisture. The mocking theory peels back the gates of his mind

with ease.

The masked demon did not rewind his physical body. He sent his consciousness back in time.

Glancing around his room for the printed calendar he used to keep taped to his wall, he checks the first unmarked date after a series of crosses.

A quirk that sends your mind fifteen years into the past.

Or this is all some elaborate mental prison to make him relive his hardships from the very beginning. How does he know he is really in the past? This could also be an incredibly slow flashback scene, and he is already dead—

“Katsuki!”

Katsuki flinches at the roar of his mother from downstairs.

“If you aren’t walking out this door in *ten minutes*… you won’t like me if I have to *come up there again*.”

“Fuck,” he breathes out, barely a whisper. Katsuki tries to ignore his thundering heartbeat pulsing in his ears as he shoves his things back into his schoolbag. Quickly, he washes his face, brushes his teeth, swipes some deodorant, and changes into the Aldera uniform lain out on his desk chair.

He slips out the front door of his parent’s house with two minutes to spare from his mother’s wrath, schoolbag and lunchbox in his arms.

However, he walks in the complete opposite direction of the school. He needs help, and the only one who may believe his crazy story is his boss and mentor, Best Jeanist.

There are only a few people Katsuki looks up to at the seasoned age of 29 years: All Might, Best Jeanist, and Miruko. Although, he does not remember much of their first meetings, Best Jeanist has been instrumental in carving him into the hero he is today.

Katsuki curses.

Or the hero he will be in the future.

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The train hopping to Best Jeanist’s agency is uneventful. He gets a couple of stares, but it is to be expected. He is a child in a school uniform obviously skipping.

Katsuki squints up at the Genius Office, at the marble white building with long, green-tinted windows on all floors, before trudging through the front door. No matter the year, the style of the building is too much for Katsuki’s tastes.

“Um, excuse me? Kid, you can’t just walk upstairs.”

Katsuki’s eyes flicker towards the receptionist rounding her desk setup, almost waddling in her too-tight jeans. He rolls his eyes. She could not stop him even if she tried.

“Back off, I need to speak with Jeanist.”

“What could be so important one forgets their manners?” Best Jeanist asks, coming through the front door with a few sidekicks hurrying after him.

Katsuki cannot stop the relief that washes over him at the sight of his mentor. *Finally*. He makes a gesture to himself. “Me. I am so important.”

Best Jeanist chuckles, eyes crinkling. “Are you now?”

“Yes, *genius*. When you’ve been sent 15 fucking years back into your teeny bopper body, you’d be pretty high priority too.”

“You’re from the *future*?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Katsuki replies, a bite to his voice. Jeanist stopped trying to correct his speech years ago, accepting his harsh personality for what it is. However, maybe Katsuki should reel himself in just a bit with this younger version of his mentor. Who even remembers how the man reacted the first time they met?

Best Jeanist is quiet for a moment before his eyes lose the lighthearted glint to them. He fixes his hair. “Although reforming young aspiring heroes is what I do, I’m afraid I don’t have time for a child’s pranks right now. If you would so kindly…” he nods to two of the extras behind him. *Spick* and *Span* hurriedly latch onto Katsuki’s arms before he can weasel out of them.

“Of course, sir! We will remove him from the premises,” Spick says before the two drag Katsuki towards the entrance.

Katsuki bucks in their hold, kicking his legs to jerk from their tight grip. “What the fuck? Stop it! I’m being serious. *Jeanist*!”

He falls onto his ass as the two sidekicks slam the front door in his face.

“Listen to me!” Katsuki shouts, gaining a few stares from the people walking around him. He goes to pull the door back open. But it is locked. Those *fuckers*.

“Damn it!”

If Best Jeanist will not listen to him, and he has no idea what the masked villain who did this to him even looks like, how is he going to get back to his time?

Can he even get back to his time? What if the kingpin burned or dismembered his prone body, or he actually swapped places with his younger, unexperienced self and got himself killed? What if he just ceased to exist in his time?

Katsuki has no idea how this quirk works, and the thought devours him from the inside.

He is stranded in the past.

Only when a passing cloud dims his light does Katsuki realize he has been staring at the glass doors like an idiot. He stoops to pick up his fallen schoolbag and lunchbox.

What else could he do but return emptyhanded to his parent’s house?

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The slap to his cheek makes a resounding impact.

His mother is furious. The irate scowl on her face could rival the cruelest devil. “I must be dreaming. Because why else would I get a call from your school, saying you never showed up for classes today?”

Katsuki stares pointedly at the ground, bottling up his own growing frustration. One punch cost him his pro-hero life. His mentor thinks he is a joke. And his mother is more of a raging bitch in the past.

He takes a deep breath.

The last thing he needs is to blow up on his own mother. She is just worried and disappointed in his seemingly bad choices today.

Mitsuki grabs his face, manicured nails digging into his rounded cheeks as she talks down to him—talks down to her 29-year-old son. “Look at me when I’m talking to you. What bullshit went through your head to think it was a good idea to skip school? *Hm*?”

Katsuki finally meets her eyes, mouth set in a tight frown, and pulls her hand off his face. “Calm down, hag. I fucked up, and I’m sorry. My head’s been weird today. It won’t happen again.”

He could tell her. He could tell his father too. But he doubts he will get a different response from Best Jeanist’s. They will think he is crazy. And he honestly might be.

His mother glares down at him—something he has to get used to again—trying to pick apart his very being. But it is nearly impossible with his trained poker face. A frown tugs at her lips. “Do we need to see the doctor?”

“No,” Katsuki snaps, immediately. “I don’t know. It won’t happen again.”

She stares at him for a moment longer, her rage subsiding, and gently presses the back of her hand to his forehead. “Go lie down. You have a bit of a hot head.”

Katsuki shrugs. Any way to escape this blatant massacre of his independence. He heads for the stairs.

“Oh, and you’re grounded. To and from school *only*. You hear me? You’re on chore duties for three months. I’m going to call your father. He was worried sick.”

Katsuki crashes on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Let us review the facts: (1) he is stuck in his 14-year-old body; (2) he has no means of returning to his time; and (3) he has been grounded for the first time in over twenty years. He breathes a shuddering breath.

His options are limited. On one hand, he could continue to visit the few people he trusts in the future, trying to get someone to listen to him and help him search for, essentially, a ghost to return to his time. On the other hand, he can relive the next 15 years to get back to his time.

Both options suck.

He could continue to look for the masked demon, but in doing so, is he affecting his younger self's education and development? Can he even find the villain or *to-be* villain in the first place? Is the villain even living a life of crime fifteen years earlier?

He could relive his life, but in doing so, he is a man out of time. Alone. Slowly crawling through the years to return to his life.

As the natural light seeping through his window dims, the decision makes itself apparent. Katsuki rubs the palms of his hands into his eyes. A fleeting thought of setting off his quirk flits through his mind.

He gets up and seats himself at his desk, pulling out a blank notebook and a pen.

The best thing he could do is write down everything he remembers happening in the next 15 years, no matter how big or small. This notebook will be his golden ticket. His constant reminder that he is not crazy. The next thing will be to overturn this room to get a complete picture of what his younger self was like.

And probably review what he has learned so far in school.

It is going to be a long night.

Good thing he does not sleep anymore.

Chapter End Notes

That's the first chapter. Did you peep the Star Wars reference? Horikoshi would be proud. Song title is from "Afraid" by The Neighborhood.

Nothing can be worse than the risk of losing what I don't have now

Chapter Notes

> Last time, Katsuki finds himself stranded in the past. He begrudgingly decides to relive the next 15 years.
>
> Thanks for the kudos and bookmarks! Song title is from "1000 Times" by Sara Bareilles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"All this work isn't good for you, bro." A concerned hand on his shoulder. "You push yourself too much."

"What do you expect from me." His own voice. It is not a question, and he does not want an answer.

The conversation fades into the darkness.

"Katsuki, don't just ignore us." The voice sounds frustrated. "Everyone needs a break."

"I take breaks." Lies.

The concern recedes once again.

"One day, you're going to need us, and we won't be there to pull you back."

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Katsuki opens his eyes.

It always frustrates him when Eijirou is right, even in his dreams.

He blinks the remnants of the blurry dream from his mind, taking in his surroundings. He must have dozed off for a couple hours. "3:47 AM," the clock reads. He is on the floor, surrounded by textbooks and his own meticulously written notes.

He stands, stretching out the hunch in his back from countless hours of future-event recording, self-investigating, and class cramming. Mainly, class cramming. At least his academic ability has not taken a hit with age.

The house is silent. Not a soul rising for the day. *Good*. Then, he can keep the mornings to himself. Have some semblance of being home in his apartment.

He goes on his usual six-mile run, followed by 30 minutes of cooldown and stretching. His lungs are on fire by the end of the run, and his body is not used to stretching this far. Ignoring the aches of his new old body, he gets ready, prepares his breakfast and lunch, and completes some of the chores his mother gave him.

He leaves for school before his parents leave their bedroom.

Walking to Aldera, he recalls his findings on his younger self from last night. He combed through his whole bedroom, leaving no inch unturned.

First, his younger self is very organized. From his eating habits to his school notes to his personal quirk training, everything is thoroughly documented and easy to understand. Now, Katsuki is still an organized person, but there is only so much you can do when you are multitasking different missions and patrols, public relations events and inter- and intra-agency meetings. Something has to give.

Second, his younger self is adamant about cleanliness and hygiene. He still is, so no surprise there. Actually, Katsuki still uses some of the same personal hygiene products as his younger self, only updating to ones that better suited his age. He is *not* going to look like some crusty, musty extra.

Third, his younger self is not as good at hiding his All Might obsession as he seems to think. The well-played-with action figures, the painstakingly preserved limited-edition posters, and the folded baby blanket all shoved into the back of his closet says enough.

Lastly, his younger self does not seem to have a life outside of school and personal training. Katsuki swears he had at least *a couple* of friends. Yet, it looks like he stopped playing with other children sometime in elementary school. Although, in the future, the only ones who can put up with his sorry ass are Camie, Eijirou, Izuku, and Shouto—he still has friends. Had. Will have. *Has*. *Fuck*.

Finally reaching the school, Katsuki is almost surprised it is open this early. Probably due to morning sports practices. He finds his homeroom with some difficulty, but that is not the worst of it.

Which one of these damn chairs is his assigned seat?

All those thorough school notes, and his younger self just *expects* him to know which seat is his. Huffing, Katsuki chooses a seat at random. He will move later if it is a problem.

As he flips through the last of his notes that he dozed over, the classroom door quietly slides open and closed. Katsuki does not look up, and whoever it is does not address him. Light footsteps fumble at the door before trudging deeper into the class.

“Um, Kacchan?” Katsuki stills. Even at a higher pitch and cracked, he knows that annoying voice anywhere. “Are you okay?”

Katsuki turns around in his seat, finally taking in the younger version of his friend. *Scrawny*. Even worse than him. Unscarred. Insecure. His eyes narrow, a frown tugging on his lips.

Izu—*Midoriya* is also *wrong*. What did he expect?

Midoriya’s eyes bulge, and he waves his hands comically. “Not that you need help or anything! B-but you missed class yesterday for the first time. And, um, you’re sitting in the wrong seat.”

Katsuki is quiet for a second. “Which seat is mine?”

Midoriya blinks and belatedly points to the desk two seats in front of Katsuki. He sucks his teeth and moves his stuff to his actual seat. “Thanks,” he grumbles out.

“Th-thanks?” Midoriya repeats, looking even more confused. Katsuki rolls his eyes. The boy is a walking ball of trembling nerves.

But that is Katsuki’s fault, right?

He sighs and leans back in his chair, staring at the ceiling blankly. Katsuki did bully him ruthlessly, starting at the lively age of *four*.

It is something Izuku and he never talk about. They are a celebrated wonder duo, an unstoppable force in the face of evil. The Symbol of Hope and the Symbol of Victory who brought back the trust in heroes—the media *loves* to use. Izuku even has his own hero agency, Agency Deku, which he never fails to ask Katsuki to leave Genius for. They hang out at each other’s apartments, get drinks after hours, spar together—when they have a moment to breathe outside of work. Katsuki could not count how many times they trend on social media every month.

His Izuku is the Number One Hero. A veteran. A smug piece of shit. A pillar of unending support. An important rival. A brother. *This* Midoriya is foreign, unrecognizable. And the more he sits in this classroom, the more he remembers—

“What can a dweeb like you accomplish?”

“You don’t even have a fucking quirk, so where do you get off putting yourself on the same level as me?”

“He’s such a sad sack that, even now as a senior, he still can’t face reality.”

“If you want to be a hero so bad, there’s actually a really good way. If you believe they’re holding your quirk over in the next world, you should just dive off the rooftop and get it.”

—the more he wonders how Izuku forgave him. He is the reason this boy is so scared to say what is on his mind.

Katsuki’s face scrunches in shame. The least he could do is stop bullying Midoriya. The timeline be damned. If he has to relive 15 years of his life, he is doing it his way.

He just hopes his friends are there to greet him when he makes it out.

The class fills up, and Katsuki’s initial thought is correct. He did have friends: Extra #1 and Extra #2. The ones currently heckling him for being a hypocrite about skipping class.

“I just think it’s funny that *we* can’t do it without you being an ass, but *you* can.”

“And what’s up with your pants, dude? Your mom finally make you wear a belt?”

Thankfully, the teacher starts class before Katsuki has a dilemma over decking a child. However, a new one presents itself: the glaring reality that a 29-year-old pro hero is retaking middle school with a bunch of 14-year-old brats. A sudden weariness settles over his body. He reluctantly accepted the repeat studying, but this is a whole other frustrating pill to swallow. Is he sure he is alive? Because this looks like the first circle of Hell to him.

He takes a deep breath.

Class is boring, especially so the second time around. Uneventful, except for one annoying detail. Every time a student answers a question wrong, the teacher calls on Katsuki to provide the correct answer.

Why.

Does the guy have it out for him or something? Is this supposed to be flattering, thinking he will always know the right answer? Bastard.

Fortunately, he manages to correctly answer each time, but a quarter of them are guesses. Katsuki is fluent in English, Hindi, and Mandarin Chinese due to his university time in India and China under Miruko and Jeanist's mentorships. His mathematics knowledge is mainly finance and algebra, and his science knowledge is mostly chemistry. So, it is not that he is academically inept, but he also does not walk around with random history facts in his back pocket. He is lucky he reviewed Japanese history last night.

On the bright side, nothing is worse than filing his taxes every year or writing damage reports for the agency's insurance company. Typically, a Japanese resident does not have to file their own taxes due to the dependable tax withholding system, but with the international work Katsuki does, he tends to have another employer in addition to the Genius Office, and that makes him an exception. *Every year*.

The bell rings.

"Ah, before you go, don't forget to consider your future plans. You're all seniors now," the teacher points out, but a sly smile tugs at his face. "But I bet you'll all be heroes!"

The class explodes into excited cheers and chatter. Katsuki raises an eyebrow, looking around. Most of these brats do not have what it takes to become heroes, and he is being lenient with that statement.

"Bakugou wants to go to Yuuei!" Extra #1 boasts for some reason, and the class stares at Katsuki in awe.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"How cocky!" someone exclaims.

"Doesn't Midoriya want to go to Yuuei too?" another student pipes up.

The class quiets. And it only takes one snort for the silent dam to break into a sea of laughter.

"Ha! Midoriya? There is no way."

"If the only thing you can do is study, then heroics is a pipe dream."

"You can't be a *quirkless* hero."

The boy in question fumbles out of his seat, trying to stand up for himself. "Th-there's no rule against it or anything!"

However, the class just laughs harder. A vein pops in Katsuki's right temple.

He slams his fist on his desk, the loud sound cancelling out the rest. The look in his eyes dared a soul to keep laughing. Satisfied, he glares at the teacher letting this shit drag on.

"Teacher. Finish your announcement, so I can leave already."

The teacher clears his throat. "Ahem! As I was saying, I would like your future plan worksheets filled out and handed in by tomorrow…"

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Katsuki leaves school, ignoring his younger self's friends as they follow behind him, conversing. He is not talking or even acknowledging their existences, so he does not understand why they still trail behind him. He just wants to go home by himself.

Irritated, he punts a soda bottle down the street as he walks, mentally berating himself for not throwing it in the trash instead.

A suffocating scent assaults his nose.

Kids these days.

Snatching the cigarette out of Extra #2's mouth, Katsuki explodes the offending object between his fingertips. He glares at the boy. "Keep this up, and forget having a future."

The boy laughs nervously, "Dude, a bit much, don't you think?"

Katsuki does not budge. "Those death sticks will ruin your body. Don't come crying to me when it happens."

Katsuki's heart quickens. He stiffens.

The sound of television static just barely tickles his ears.

And a feeling of déjà vu douses him in cold water. The hairs on the back of Katsuki's neck stand up. Every warning signal in his body shooting off, screaming at him.

Memories slip through a crack in the steel box haunting the back of his mind.

It's today, isn't it?

Katsuki's body dives to the side before his mind catches up to what he is escaping.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees it. Black sludge warps to form some attempt at a body. Yellow eyes with bloodshot pupils zero in on his figure.

Katsuki shudders involuntarily, staying crouched and ready to dodge another attack.

"Nice, a new disguise, and one with a tasty quirk and good reflexes too."

Katsuki anticipates the sludge lurching forward and dives to the side once again, staying in his alert and defensive stance.

He refuses to get caught by this villain. *Never again*. Even if he is not powerful enough to stop it himself, he could easily avoid it. Yet, as he dodges, his *ever-so all-knowing* mind whispers a little secret. If the sludge villain incident is today, then he knows what *else* happens today as a result. He would have been happier never recalling this fact. Never hearing about it over drinks with Izuku.

For, if he does not play damsel, succumbing to this villain's advances, how else will All Might recognize Midoriya as the rightful successor of One-For-All?

If this really is the past, he could seriously alter the course of the future by not getting captured… by letting some passing hero save them instead… by not letting All Might make the correct decision… by forcing Midoriya to give up his only dream. And he would *never* subject someone else to the clutches of a villain.

So, he stops.

His body slowly rises from his defensive stance. His eyes droop, losing the will to watch it happen, closing softly.

And the sludge slams into him.

._._.

His throat is burning.

It is dark. Something black swirls in his vision, slowly meandering over his eyes. It almost has a lulling effect. So interesting to watch the blackness churn and twist.

Breathe.

An acrid smell dulls his senses. It is disgusting, smelling of sewage, but the only thing he can do is note its presence. Like annoying dust in the air, he can try to wave it away, but the smell just swoops and whirls around his being. Never leaving.

Breathe!

More annoying than the smell, it feels like a billion tiny needles are piercing his skin. An intense pressure behind each pinprick, threatening to break his skin. His bones. His organs. His whole being.

But his *throat*. It is on fire. *Boiling*. It feels tight, as if something were shoving its way down. But why is it burning?

It is hard to think. His mind is almost too calm. Too still.

Breathe, damn it!

Light blinds his eyes as reality returns to Katsuki. The outside world is spinning and moving too fast for him to discern shapes. His entire body is covered in the black sludge as it tries to find purchase in his being.

And he is suffocating. Gagging on sludge covering his mouth.

Immediately, he sets his quirk off, trying to struggle, move, writhe, *anything*.

But he is losing.

He is dying.

He cannot think. There is too much pressure surrounding him; he thinks his brain will ooze from his ears, his organs bubble from his nose. Black spots dance in front of his eyes again, threatening to send him back to the calm place, threatening to submit his body to the sludge.

Panicked, Katsuki tries to scream around the sludge smothering him, letting off the largest explosions he can muster.

The booming blowback jostles his head, and his surroundings come into focus.

He is surrounded by people.

A ring of civilians, staring, filming, chatting, as if this is a sideshow. Pro heroes watching him struggle or saving injured people from the wreckage he caused. The media rolling the cameras and reporting as if he is an interesting spectacle.

A thousand eyes watching him at his weakest. What burns worse, he wonders. The humiliation or the sludge?

Please, stop looking.

“Kacchan!”

A yellow backpack pitifully smacks the sludge, its contents spilling onto the ground.

Katsuki can only stare through blurry eyes.

Midoriya is trying to claw him out. His mouth is moving a mile a minute, but Katsuki cannot hear him anymore. Is there sludge in his ears too?

The vibrations of the villain’s voice wrack through his body as he roars, ”Don’t get in my way!”

A giant hand with the intent to kill is moments from crushing a scrawny child with snot and tears rolling down his face.

“***Detroit Smash!***”

·_·_·

Katsuki comes to, dangling in the air, his arm crushed in All Might’s tight grasp. He drops to the ground and stumbles on trembling legs over to the side of a building. And he promptly retches the sludge lodged into his stomach.

His head is swimming. The black dots still dance mockingly in his eyes. He gulps in air, trying to remember how to breathe.

Was it really this awful the first time? Why could he not remember it being so painful? Until right before? Never again. The pressure. The disorientation. The *taste*.

The thousand eyes.

Shame blankets Katsuki's body, blood rushing to his ears. All Might laughs in front of the cameras and countless people clamoring for his attention, and Katsuki flinches at the sound.

With no intention of letting anyone see him in this state any longer, he bolts.

"Hey, kid!" he thinks he hears in the distance. He ignores it.

Trying to make it back to his parent's house, Katsuki remembers his mother's words. He is supposed to be grounded, right? To and from school only, she says.

Does his sentence include villain attacks or not? She really did not specify.

A disturbing laugh bubbles out of his mouth.

His legs buckle, and Katsuki stumbles into a huddle of bushes, crashing into the dirt and breathing heavily. Which way is up again?

He does not notice time passing until All Might's voice nudges him back to existence.

"There's something that's said about top heroes when they were still students… most of their stories are linked by the following line: 'My body moved on its own before I could think!' And you did the same thing." Katsuki covers his mouth, body completely still.

This is it.

"You can become a hero," All Might declares.

Midoriya, a child beaten down by prejudice and Katsuki's own fist, the only one who tried to help him, drops to his knees as he sobs. His dream is not dead.

Katsuki passes out in the bush.

·_·_·

Katsuki's Events Notebook

1. *Sludge villain incident [added: Deku gets OFA]*
2. *Yuuei entrance exams*
3. *Graduated middle school*
4. *Did I win the Sports Festival my first year?*
5. *Kidnapped by League of Extras*
6. *The War for All ends*
7. *Graduated high school*
8. *Future heroes fellowship stationed in India and China*
9. *Returned to Japan*
10. ...

Chapter End Notes

For all Katsuki brags about his amazing memory, he’s got some interesting holes where things get a little… exhausting.

And I can’t hide ‘cause growing pains are keeping me up at night

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki remembers how much of a bully he was and relives the sludge villain incident. Everything is fine.

Song title is from "Growing Pains" by Alessia Cara.

Warning: mentions of drinking or underage drinking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Take a picture. It’ll last longer,” Katsuki snaps, and the middle-aged lady making *sympathetic* eyes scoffs and pushes her cart out of the grocery aisle.

He does not know what is worse: the constant pointing and staring, or the actual event. He would *think* his patience is astronomical since he is constantly in the eyes of the public as a pro hero. Above all, he has had worse humiliations in his life. However, there is something *grating* about this particular event. And these particular stares.

The kids at school praise him for surviving, but whisper behind his back. The people on the street stare at him in *pity*. God, even his own mother bought him a phone, demanding he text her every hour he is not at the house.

The look of abject horror on her face when he finally made it home—the cellphone dialing the police slipped from her fingers—was difficult to process.

At least he is granted time outside of school now.

Katsuki finishes purchasing the groceries his mother’s list, as well as his own, and leaves the store.

Honestly, he does not understand the concern. For someone ripped from their time, ripped from the few but strong relationships built *by* time and personal development, by self-reflection and swallowed pride, ripped from the *one thing* that made him feel worthwhile and needed and put-together, and forced to forge everything over *again*—Katsuki thinks he is handling it pretty fucking well.

Focusing on training helps take his buzzing mind off the attention. He has less than ten months to beat his body into a better version of his beanpole self for Yuuei’s entrance exam for the Hero Department. Luckily, he is his own personal trainer.

Every Monday through Saturday, Katsuki goes on a six-mile run for endurance, practices two hours of gymnastics for flexibility and balance, takes Judo and mixed martial arts classes at the community center in the city, free-runs as much of the way back as he can for agility, and privately hones his quirk control and output in the forest by his neighborhood. At his parent’s house, he holes up in his room and studies for the written exam.

If it seems like a lot, it is, but his body will get used to it. The burning in his muscles makes him feel accomplished.

Besides, he takes Sundays off.

Unloading groceries onto the kitchen counter, a head of broccoli for stir-fry makes him speculate how Midoriya is managing. The boy disappears outside of school. Not like he sees him outside of classes anyway, but they do live in the same neighborhood.

He probably started his training with All Might if the hand curl he tries to hide under his desk is any indication. Or the fact that he looks like the walking dead, mentally and physically exhausted every day.

He wonders what training under All Might is like.

"Young Midoriya! Make sure your punches are *swoosh* and *bam*!" Katsuki tries his best All Might impression while flitting around the kitchen and storing groceries, but ends up wheezing from laughter in front of the refrigerator. "You can't give up! I'm dumping the weight of the world on your shoulders! *Plus Ultra!*"

He does not say "Plus Ultra" in *every* conversation. Probably.

"Only crazy people talk to themselves," his mother's voice interrupts his impressions.

"Takes one to know one, hag," he fires back, finally getting his body under control.

"Watch your mouth, brat," she warns, but the corner of her mouth is quirked up. She walks into the kitchen, almost hesitant, and roughly ruffles his hair, discreetly checking him over. Katsuki growls inadvertently, swatting at her hands.

It is something she started doing after the event. Reassuring herself her son is still here.

Satisfied, she grabs a water bottle from the fridge and takes her exit. "When you're done, don't forget to do the laundry."

"I didn't forget."

Being a child, even with his crazy training, exam studying, and schoolwork, he still has more free time than as an adult. So, he does not mind the cleaning and errands that much. They are relaxing, and they keep his mind calm.

Though, if Katsuki has to choose a favorite, it would be folding laundry. The fresh scent of laundry and the gentle warmth of clothes straight from the dryer are so satisfying.

He snorts. When did chores stop being a chore to him?

"You're like an old lady, Kacchan."

"I'm not old, I'm responsible, dipshit. I would be embarrassed if all my shirts were missing buttons like yours."

"Hey! They're not all missing buttons."

Katsuki shakes the memory from his mind.

._._.

His day rolls by leisurely as he finishes the laundry, works on controlling his quirk in confined spaces, and practices the essay prompt portion of the written exam.

He rubs his eyes and stretches his sore muscles in his chair. These essay prompts are the most useless skill in the world. He writes memos, reports, even hero policy reviews—not choppy, condensed essays on worthless topics.

Katsuki checks the time. 11:39 PM. He could use a break.

He browses his old bookshelf, amused by the large amount of romance novels on his shelf. So, the All Might obsession is too embarrassing, but the romance novel obsession is all right? Okay, younger self.

He could not remember the last time he read a romance novel. Most of his books at home are mystery and crime thrillers. He wonders when his genre preferences changed.

He plucks the first book he sees, a cliché cover of a boy and girl glaring at each other, and flops onto his bed. He will read a few chapters and get back to studying—

He is surrounded by rows and rows of eyes, curled in delight. Laughing at him. Criticizing him for being useless and volatile.

He tries to move, but he cannot. Something black, something viscous, wraps around him, restraining him. He can only stare back at the millions of eyes picking him apart.

“Kacchan! Kacchan!” Stop.

Stop calling his name like that.

“Dynamight!”

There Izuku is, sprinting to him, draped in green lightning and the commanding authority of his work uniform.

Look, here comes a real hero.

“Your face seemed to be calling for help,” Izuku claims, his voice vaguely mocking. When he finally reaches his restrained body, he stops and watches Katsuki struggle.

“Pathetic! Pathetic!” is chanted around him, eerily similar to Best Jeanist’s disappointed voice.

Katsuki squeezes his eyes shut. “Stop!”

He opens them slowly, and he is staring at his 14-year-old body staring back at him. Watching him suffocate as the coils of black twist tighter around his kid body.

He looks like he is pleading for help. Unable to call out.

Though, due to the sludge or his own toxic delusions, he wonders?

He melts.

Katsuki bucks in surprise, watching skin bubble and dissolve, blood spraying, and innards squelching to the ground. Inside, the mask of a red demon peeks out.

The red yaksha.

He slithers out of the gore, meandering towards him with such calm, taking in his immobilized form.

"Hm."

He circles, like a predator assessing his prey.

"It seems, no matter how you grow, weakness is in your DNA."

The yaksha slinks into a snake, yellow fangs bared.

He lashes—

His throat is burning.

Katsuki wakes with a start, singe marks in his sheets, smoke hovering in his bedroom.

He cannot breathe. He cannot *breathe*.

Forcing his petrified body to move, he slams the window open, sucking in the cool night air. Trying to appease his scorched lungs. The smoke in his room clears slowly.

He needs a smoke alarm *inside* this room, he thinks offhandedly, not right *outside* of his closed door.

"What the fuck," he spits. He was only reading that stale romance novel. When did he fall asleep? "What the fuck was that."

He stands abruptly.

No. Whatever that was, it did not happen.

He smacks his face a couple of times. "Buck up, you trembling fuck."

He needs a distraction. And then, everything will be fine because he is *fine*.

Stumbling down the stairs, he spots the cabinet he veers to every time he visits his parent's house. He knocks back three shots of whiskey like water, disregarding the way his young body shudders at the foreign substance, and he stalks out the house in the first set of shoes he spots.

Air. He just needs some air. And a long, mind-numbing walk.

Sure, he may look crazed—lurking around outside in only sweatpants and sandals—but, if he actually runs into someone in the dead of night, they can, respectfully, fuck off.

·_·_·

He wanders.

His walk has no rhyme or reason to it. He just lets his feet keep moving. As long as he outpaces whatever that was, he does not care.

He did not grab his phone, and the front door to his parent's house is unlocked. That is concerning. He should care. He should turn back right this instant.

He keeps stumbling forward.

Frankly, he overreacted. It was a nightmare, plain and simple. People get them every now and then. He has witnessed, and continues to witness, the dark underbelly of Japan, India, and China with the missions he completes. Nightmares are a part of the job description.

Every time Eijirou gets one, after a gruesome battle, he is always quick to call Katsuki. It is the assumption Katsuki will pick up every time that frustrates him to no end. Well, he *does* pick up every time, but that is beside the point. He is a busy man. Was a busy man? *Fuck*.

Katsuki shakes the thoughts from his head. If he worries about getting back to his time, it will only frustrate him. Slow and steady wins the race, right? He will be back and better than ever, and then they can all laugh about it over drinks. First pro to survive the perks of time travel and all that jazz.

Well, he would not mind a fast forward through school.

He continues to wander, his buzzing mind gradually quieting.

"Shit, where's your wallet? Can't get this plastered without cash."

Katsuki's head instantly turns in the direction of the voice, eyes searching in the darkness, his mind sharpening.

"At least you're nice to look at."

What the hell.

Katsuki sprints, his footsteps completely silent as he happens upon an alleyway.

Inside, an intoxicated woman is shoved against the brick wall. A tall man hunches over her, sifting through her rumpled clothes, one hand clamped over her mouth. Her wet eyes quiver in absolute fear, her body stock-still and unable to move.

Katsuki does not need to think to act.

He darts forward. Grabbing the back of the man's shirt with both hands, Katsuki throws him over his shoulder.

"Wha?"

The man crumples like a razed building, rolling onto his back on the ground. He does not get a chance to look around.

Katsuki slams the heel of his foot into his stomach. The scream that rips out of the man's mouth is satisfying, but he needs to shut the fuck up.

Immediately, Katsuki kicks the man's head, knocking him out on impact.

With a huff, he pushes the man onto his stomach with his foot, hogtying his arms and legs together with his belt. Assessing his work, Katsuki turns to the shocked woman, clutching the tiny purse she purposefully hid behind her back.

"You have a phone?"

She flinches at his voice, but belatedly nods her head and fumbles for the device.

"Call the police. I'll stay with you until they arrive," Katsuki instructs, trying for a soft tone. He has always been shit at consoling civilians.

"Th-thank you," her voice slightly slurred, "I… I just froze, I'm sorry, I didn't know what to do—I was just going home—I walked my friend to her place and was going home myself—and he came out of nowhere and pushed me into the wall and put his hand on my mouth and—" The woman is blinking back tears and hyperventilating, staring at the cellphone in her trembling hands as if it will call the police for her.

Katsuki cautiously approaches her, well aware of his state of undress, with his hands raised in surrender. "Hey, it's okay. You're going to be okay. If you hand me the phone, I can call the police for you."

She sniffles and holds out the device with both hands. "Th-thank you… Thank you so much. I didn't think anyone would come."

Katsuki dials the police and concisely explains the situation, easily dodging any questions concerning him personally.

"The police are on their way," he says, handing the phone back to her.

"O-okay, thank you," she says, her legs giving out as she slides down the side of the brick wall, knees bunched to her chest.

"You don't need to thank me. Anyone would have done what I did." Katsuki joins her, leaning his head back against the wall.

The man groans in pain as he slowly wakes, too disoriented to form a coherent sentence.

"You're wrong," she replies, her voice but a whisper, eyes trained on the dazed assailant in front of them. Katsuki does not know how to answer, so he stays quiet. And true to his word, he stays with her until the police car flashers light up the alleyway.

He slips away before they can see him.

·_·_·

Ending a man's career in sweatpants and sandals and slightly drunk is not how Katsuki expected his walk to end. However, there is nothing that pulls him from his headspace better than doing the one thing he does best.

Save people.

It gives him an idea. A bad one. An *illegal* one. One that he is itching to do again.

Being a hero again, no matter how smalltime, takes his mind off of trivial topics, such as nightmares and their causes.

The pressure of being at the top, being one of the best, a power to be reckoned with—well, it forces him to be at his best at all times, mentally and physically.

He obviously cannot run out into this world, hands blazing, and have huge citywide brawls. He cannot conduct intricate undercover investigations. He cannot even use his quirk; in the small probability someone pieces two and two together. However, in the veil of the dark, and his person concealed in black clothes, he could stop cases like tonight's. He is quick on his feet. And, for someone as loud as he, silence comes easy. He knows how to hide in the shadows. Like…

Katsuki snaps his fingers in recollection as he paces in his room. What is that quirkless American comic book hero's name again? *Ah*.

"Like Batman." He pauses. "Minus the dead parents, endless riches, child acquiring, and obvious psychological issues."

As long as they are within his ability, he does not see why he cannot. Why he cannot stop muggers, robbers, and smalltime crooks trying to hide their crimes in the dead of night. And his parents will be asleep hours before he leaves the house.

Katsuki winces. No, he can see why he *should not*. He will be breaking the law. He—even if *he is* —is not a licensed pro hero in this younger body of his. Vigilantism is taken seriously in Japan.

Even so…

"I didn't think anyone would come."

Why was a hero not there tonight?

If he is not a part of a night raid or undercover mission, Katsuki always patrols at night. Most of the time, they are boring, dragging on endlessly. But he is right there when something *does* happen. So, the heroes of today must be patrolling at night. And there are *a lot* more heroes today than in the future.

Yet, someone still manages to slip under the radar.

"I won't do anything excessive," he mumbles to himself, still pacing. "I'll stop by the time the entrance exam rolls around. It'd be good to get used to fighting others in this body again. It'll just be more training."

After a beat.

"No one's going to know."

And, *god*, does he miss it.

·_·_·

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/riptide410 · 7h

My friend saw one…

…In Musutafu, Japan. My friend was telling me how he almost got stabbed walking home after an overnight shift at McMight's, and this guy in a hoodie and face mask disarmed and knocked out his attacker. Like instantly. Dude decked him, restrained him, and disappeared lolol. My friend thinks he's quirkless. Or has something mental like quick learning haha. Anyone else see him? He appeared last Thursday after 12 AM.

14k upvotes · 65 comments

…

[Best Comments]

gloobbabs · 6h

I think so? I thought he was a new pro with a shit costume and even shittier manners.

Some bastard walked into me and had the gall to say it was my fault. He broke my fucking nose, and I thought he was gonna crack open my skull, but this urban ninja-looking guy drop kicks him outta nowhere. Like he came out the sky.

Bastard was out like a light. I kicked him while he was still down too. For good measure. Karma's a bitch, ain't it?

But back to the vigilante(?), after he tied up that guy, he stayed with me, helped me get my nosebleed under control, and waited with me until the police came. Couldn't really get a good look since his hood was up, and he had a face mask on, and I was fucking delirious after getting my face smashed in. But I think he had red eyes? Didn't use a quirk.

Happened two days ago, after 2 AM I think

3k upvotes · 71 replies

…

[Newest Comments]

zarymary101 · 10m

I thought we had laws against vigilantism? Great you all are okay, but like… leave it to the pros?

99 upvotes · 36 replies

|| [Recent Replies]

|| dbsdbs · 2m

|| *I mean, he's not the only one, or we wouldn't have this sub-heroddit. But, if it gets outta hand, Hero Commish'll probably do something. I don't really care tho. I like not dying.*

|| 17 upvotes

Chapter End Notes

Katsuki, an intellectual: It will be a great learning and training experience.
Katsuki, actually at night: Bitches think I'm fighting to save people, but I just like to fight.

Children waiting for the day they feel good and to feel the way that every child should

Chapter Notes

> Last time, Katsuki has a nightmare and takes up “little acts of kindness” to feel grounded by duty and heroism again.
>
> This chapter will not be in Katsuki’s point of view. This chapter is a little break from the typical angst and may seem a bit slow. Song title is from “Mad World (feat. Gary Jules)” by Michael Andrews.
>
> I received a question about Katsuki’s views on quirkless people in this fic, and I wanted give everyone the opportunity to see my response: In the future, he’s grown passed thinking people with quirks are better than those without (quirkism?); however, you are an extra to him unless you’ve gained some level of his respect (e.g., he looks up to you, he can easily work with you, you’re one of his parents, or you’re his friend). He appreciates strength that comes in different forms, but he is still stuck in his ways that he needs to recognize some level of value in you to respect you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Izuku’s POV** ._._.

Today is his fifteenth birthday!

Well, actually, he forgot today is his birthday, but he should not sweat the small stuff. His mom was happy to remind him this morning—she burst into his room with so many balloons and such a wide and wobbly smile on her rosy face.

Every year without fail, his mom does something for his birthday. She takes off the whole day from work, and he takes off the day from school. Although today they are fortunate it is a Sunday.

Izuku changes the TV channel, searching for any news on the giant hero battle from yesterday and pumping a dumbbell with his free arm. The delicious aroma of souffle pancakes teases his nose and makes his stomach rumble. He sighs, excited. His mom’s food is the best!

To be honest, Izuku was going to head to the beach and continue his training with All Might. He really does not have time to take a break from training if he wants to be ready for the Yuuei entrance exam. No, that is not quite right. He has *no time* for breaks if he wants to be stronger than the strongest hero. He *needs* to surpass his limits every waking second to keep up.

But… he is not about to crush his mom’s heart after everything she is doing, and has done, to celebrate him.

She always makes a big deal of his birthday, but his lack of friends really worries her, so she goes all out as much as she can. So he knows he is loved.

So, he is going to take today off.

And All Might already barred him from the beach when he shared his dilemma with the man.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Izuku jumps at the loud knocking on the front door. Wow, where is the fire? He turns towards the kitchen, where his mom is sure to try to cook and answer the door all by herself.

"I got it, Mom!"

"Oh, thank you, honey! I was just about to go," his mom's soft voice floats from the kitchen as he walks towards the apartment's entrance.

He fumbles with the lock a bit before quickly pulling the front door open, an apology already on his lips. "Sorry for the wait! Can I help… *Kacchan?*"

He is sure his face is priceless… because he does not know which emotion is making an appearance. Does he look confused due to the fact his childhood friend is standing in front of his door? Or does he look scared because his childhood friend is *standing in front of his door*?

Does he look impressed because Kacchan actually remembers where he lives? Or does he look scared because *Kacchan actually remembers where he lives*? And now he can criticize him whenever he wants?

Probably dread. No, *definitely* dread.

"Kacchan!" he exclaims again, his eyes as wide as saucers, hands wrangling to find purchase in this situation. And all the training and encouraging words from All Might slip from his mind as he is once again reduced to the scared little Deku.

At least on his birthday, could the other boy not ridicule him?

The boy in question lifts an eyebrow, his mouth almost quirked up in a confused smile. "Yeah, that's my name, I guess. Don't wear it out," he says, stepping closer.

And he pushes a cream-colored box into Izuku's hands. It is decorated with little pink whisks and mixing bowls. "*Charmy's Café*," is printed on top in flowy, pink script. A quite large box; large enough to fit a cake. But it cannot possibly be a cake. Because then that means Kacchan *bought him a cake* for his birthday.

"It *is* your birthday, right?"

Izuku blinks, his initial dread subsiding as he observes his childhood friend who is crossing his freed arms.

Kacchan is in workout clothes, orange blinking earphones hanging around his neck. And it is easy to see how much he has been training these past months as well. His body is all sharp, lean muscle and little fat. Wound up and deadly. Coiled and tight. As if he is ready to strike at all times.

And he has dark blotches under his eyes.

Which is confusing because, if Izuku remembers correctly, Kacchan always goes to sleep early at night. A healthy diet and eight hours of sleep is his childhood friend's mantra. So, what is preventing him from sleeping? Is something bothering him? What could be so intense that it disturbs *the* Katsuki Bakugou?

Izuku gasps internally. Is it the sludge villain incident? What else could it be?

Kacchan disappeared immediately after the attack. One second he was on the ground next to him, winded by All Might's massive punch, and the next, he was gone. Izuku did not see the other boy leave. Yet, he came to class the next day looking perfectly fine. Izuku did not think anything of it. Well, he could not think anything of it.

He had been told his dreams were not dead by his idol. His mind was sort of occupied.

Kacchan snaps his fingers in his face, "*Hello?*"

Izuku flinches, his wandering mind halting to a stop, and he blurts the first thing his malfunctioning brain-to-mouth filter allows.

"It's not going to blow up in my face, is it?"

Izuku pauses, closing his eyes as an unnatural calm blankets his body. His mouth sets in a thin straight line. Curse his nervous speaking tendencies. Because he is going to die now.

Sorry, All Might.

But the impending explosion does not slam into his face. Instead, he is left with a quiet snort. Izuku opens his eyes at the noise. Kacchan shakes his head lightly, the corner of his mouth quirked up.

He is not mad. Not even a little bit.

"Good idea," Kacchan finally says. "Next time." He turns to leave, plugging his earphones back into his ears, but Izuku's mom pops up behind her very confused son.

"Ka-Katsuki?" she gasps, her hands covering her mouth. "Katsuki, dear! It's been so long. Oh, the last time I saw you, you were barely as tall as my hip."

Kacchan turns back around, looking quite surprised. "Really?"

His mom nods, a small smile on her face that does not seem to reach her eyes. She glances at the cake box in Izuku's hands, and it is like watching a slow-motion movie play on her face. The confusion. The incredulousness. Then, the intense appreciation. Her eyes wobble, tearing up in the classic Midoriya way.

"Katsuki, did you bring this over for my little Zuzu?" she whispers, her soft voice wavering. She wipes her eyes, a gentle smile on her face. "Why don't you come in? We are just about to sit down for a special birthday brunch! And I made enough food to feed a whole town."

Izuku balks. He is about to *leave*, and now they are inviting him *in*?

Okay, he has to admit, the explosive boy seems to have mellowed out immensely these past months. He is quieter, and he keeps to himself even more than before.

Even more importantly, Kacchan has not laid a single hand on Izuku since that day he forgot his own seat in class. The day of the sludge villain incident. Sometimes his friends try to rile Izuku up out of boredom, but Kacchan will snag their collars and drag them away before anything bad happens. It is insanely weird and disturbing.

However, twilight zone or not, Izuku does not want to spend his birthday with his childhood friend.

Kacchan immediately shakes his head, “No, thank you. I’m about to work out, so.” He bows his head slightly and turns to leave again.

But Izuku knows his mom. She has been moved by this suddenly heavy cake box in his hands. Someone other than herself has acknowledged her son’s birthday for the first time in *ten years*. She *has* to invite him in. And she will not take no for an answer.

She waves her hands. “Nonsense! Surely you can spare time for such a special meal?”

·_·_·

They silently sit across from each other as his mom finishes preparing a feast of souffle pancakes, tamagoyaki, little decorative sausages, grilled fish, several vegetable side dishes, and miso soup.

The situation is incredibly awkward, and, for the love of all things All Might, Izuku cannot stop fidgeting. How could he stop? What is he supposed to say to Kacchan? How does he talk to the other boy again? Have they ever had a real conversation before? What *can* he say?

He writhes his hands together under the dining table, staring at the small floral vase placed in the middle of it.

He hears the other boy sigh, and his head snaps up in response. Kacchan scratches the back of his head.

“Look, I can leave.”

Izuku straightens his hunched back and waves his hands dramatically. “No, no, my mom *really* wants you here, and when she’s dead-set on something, she gets like this,” he chuckles nervously.

Kacchan frowns slightly, and they fall silent again, listening to the clanking of cookware and his mom’s happy humming in the kitchen.

After a beat, the other boy opens his mouth again. “I heard Mount Lady fought a giant villain the other day.”

“Oh! Oh, yeah! I read about it online. I was actually looking for some news reports or hero talk show segments before you came,” Izuku begins, surprised by the change in topic. However, this is his chance. His chance to quell the obvious awkwardness, and he is going to roll with it.

“I follow a bunch of pro-hero blogs and forums, and one completed a whole analysis on the fight. Super interesting stuff! And really thought out too! It looks like the villain—Big Ma’am—had a quirk similar to gigantification, but not quite. It was more like she inflated her body like a balloon with stretchy but tough skin. And she used that to expand herself to three stories high!” Izuku sucks in a big breath.

“I was actually planning on watching some more videos I saved on the fight tonight, but this one,” Izuku pulls out his cellphone and quickly opens a video on TúTube, practically vibrating in his seat. He leans across the table so Kacchan could see. “This video is *so* much better than the other ones! This one really captures Big Ma’am’s inflation *perfectly*. Look how she—*oh dear god*.”

Izuku freezes mid-ramble, and Big Ma’am’s cackling from the video fills the abrupt break in conversation. He is doing it again. Going on and on like some obsessive hero freak. To *Kacchan*. Izuku worries his bottom lip between his teeth, horrified.

Fortunately, like the angel she is, his mom chooses that exact moment to pop out of the kitchen, placing various plates of breakfast dishes on the table.

“Okay, everything is just about ready! What would you boys like to drink?” she asks, patting her hands on her half apron.

“Water’s fine with me,” Kacchan replies, his voice lacking any frustration over Izuku’s hero geek out.

He sighs in relief. “Um, milk, please! Thanks, mom.”

His mom is back as quickly as she leaves, seating herself on one of the open ends of the table. She clasps her hands together and beams. “Well, let’s dig in!”

Izuku tries to make sure he eats his vegetables and protein, but his mom’s pancakes are so delicious. He cannot help eating two, or three, or five. He is not a *horrible* cook, per se. He just has trouble with following recipes that say things like “add to taste” or “fold until mixed but keep the air bubbles.” Or ones that do not provide proper explanation over skills he should probably have before starting the recipe. Nevertheless, the recipe should not assume the reader knows how to do something, so the fire alarm going off or the god-awful taste is not *only* his fault.

In conclusion, he is not a great cook, but he can make cereal.

“It’s really good, Aunty,” Kacchan says after a moment, and his mom shines.

“Oh, thank you, dear! *You know*,” she starts, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. Izuku freezes. He does not like the tone of her voice. It almost sounds like she is going to invite Kacchan to something. Something Izuku wants to enjoy *only* with his mom.

“We are going visit the Musutafu Hero Museum after brunch if you would like to join us. They are showcasing a second-generation heroes exhibit this week, and I know I only have two tickets, but I can easily purchase another one!”

Izuku chokes on his milk. Kacchan’s eyes flicker towards him.

“Um… I’m not dressed for a museum,” he declines in a roundabout way.

Izuku and his mom take in the black dropped armhole tank top with the abstract grey skull painted on it; the black running tights with an orange stripe running down the sides.

Belatedly, his mom waves her hand dismissively. “Nonsense, Izuku can lend you a sweatshirt.”

“I can?”

“He can?”

“He can!”

Kacchan looks between the two of them like they just stepped out of their human disguises and revealed their true alien selves. It is nice to know Izuku is not the only one who is uncomfortable with the situation. But how can the other boy say no to his mom? He already knows it is impossible.

“Okay?”

“Then, it’s settled! Izuku, honey, why don’t you take Katsuki to your room while I clean up and purchase the ticket?”

Izuku almost feels compelled to apologize for his mom’s pushiness, but he catches himself. As he searches through his dresser for a clean sweatshirt, Kacchan silently wanders around his bedroom, pushing away stray balloons and perusing the display of All Might figurines, one hand shoved into the stretchy pocket of his running tights.

Embarrassment heats his face because, of course, he forgets how much of an All Might shrine his room has become. With multiple posters on the walls, action figures and other collectables on every surface—even his bedspread is All Might’s blown-up head. From the rude cake comment and the hero geek out at the dining table to *this*, Izuku is not sure how much more he is going to see of this suddenly benevolent Kacchan. He is long overdue for some type of detonation.

“Uh,” he starts quickly, gaining Kacchan’s piercing stare, and extends an outstretched hand containing a sweatshirt. “Here you go, Kacchan.”

Kacchan snatches the sweatshirt and pulls it over his head in a fluent motion. The sleeves barely reach his wrists, and it looks a little tight. He pushes the sleeves up to his elbows and yanks at the restricting collar. He sniffs.

“It reeks of nerd.”

“Sorry?”

“Why the fuck does it say, ‘*Tourist*?’”

“I, it came like that?”

Kacchan breathes. “Let me rephrase. Why do you own this dumb sweatshirt?”

“H-hey, I like it! I picked it out,” Izuku’s voice cracks.

“Figures,” Kacchan mumbles, his stare is full of condescension.

“I—” Izuku does not know what to say to that, but he *is* highly offended. He pouts. Not everyone has fashion designers for parents. And he likes shirts with text on them!

Yet, however critical Kacchan’s stare is, it still does not feel as mean as it could be. It is almost light. Teasing.

Not long after, his mom pops her head into his room, and they are off to the museum.

._._. **Inko's POV** ._._.

The bustling of people and activities is quite overwhelming. Izuku tends to go to these types of hero events by himself, so it is fairly new for her.

Even before entering the sliding front doors, she could tell this event is going to make her little Zuzu happy. The doormen and women hand out little decorated bags full of 3D glasses, events and information booklets, various trinkets and baubles, and a map.

Izuku practically vibrates as he consumes every bit of information in his bag, securing one of the hero-themed pins to his shirt. Inko cannot help but giggle.

The museum visit has a little bit of everything for every learner of every age. It is visual, audial, and easy to enjoy with others or alone. Life-sized wax figures of the most popular pro heroes of the age dawn long hallways. Commissions of intricate and thought-provoking art line others. Live shows with enthusiastic storytellers animatedly retell the adventures of heroes to museumgoers sitting on the edge of their seats.

"Mom! Can I…" Izuku starts. He shifts from one foot to the other, looking into the museum and back to her. Inaudibly asking for permission to run off.

Inko covers her smile with her hand and nods. "Of course, honey. Today *is* for you! Enjoy this visit however you'd like."

"Thanks, Mom! You're the best." And he is off like a track star.

Inko glances at the other boy. She is embarrassed to say she forgot he was even standing next to her. He silently skims through the informative booklet on the showcased heroes, folding down a couple of corners.

"Katsuki, dear, do you want to join Izuku?"

He looks up at the sound of her voice, but he shakes his head. "No, I'm good." After a second. "He's got a little too much enthusiasm for me to keep up."

Inko cannot stop the little snort that escapes her nose. "Then, would you like to walk with me?"

Katsuki shrugs. "Sure."

._._.

Inko is surprised. Talking to the explosive teenager is quite easy to do. Following the meandering walkways, Inko has no trouble making small talk. And Katsuki hides it well, but he is surprisingly knowledgeable of several second-generation heroes. As they stop in front of the different displays, he would add little tidbits of information here and there.

Though most of his tidbits tend to be… criticisms mumbled under his breath.

To be honest, Inko is a little nervous talking to the boy, so she starts rambling fairly quickly, going on about grocery store sales, politics, the weekly weather, her job, and any other topic that pops into her mind. And yet, Katsuki listens to every word she says.

She is surprised to find that he is temporarily shopping for groceries in the Bakugou household, so they share insider knowledge about upcoming sales. He is also frustrated with some of the economic polices trying to pass through government right now, going on about how they will "bite us in the ass in the future," and Inko let him rant for a solid ten minutes about it. She did not know he even knew about politics.

Though, listening to the teen talk, she also notices how tired he sounds. When he popped up in front of their door, Inko was so surprised and touched by the birthday cake that she did not have time to take in the growing boy in front of her.

Now, she has the time. And she worries for his health. No growing child should have such dark patches under their eyes. He should be able to sleep at night, rest his mind and body. Refresh himself for the day to come. No growing child should look like they are training their body beyond its breaking point. Like some sort of child soldier.

No child should have troubles so deep; it forces them to sound so… resigned.

But this child does, does he not?

After the sludge incident, Inko called Mitsuki. She had already wrapped her own son up in a blanket of hugs and tears after learning he was involved. That wretched villain touched her precious boy. How *dare* he! Though, if she was feeling so helpless and angry, she wondered how her friend felt as well.

Mitsuki is quite the preacher of tough love and discipline. She is a very hardheaded mother, difficult to please and only accepting the best from her son, but turns around and acts so openly loving and sociable to her friends. The whiplash from her emotional switches gets to Inko sometimes.

And her friend was a *mess*. Inko had never heard Mitsuki cry before, and the woman bawled hard enough to make it challenging to breathe. She was barely able to explain how Katsuki came home so late, looking so pale, so sick and dirty. She had *never* seen her son look like that before.

Izuku bounces up to the pair, his 3D glasses pushed into his unruly hair, and practically shines. "You have to go the next 3D showing of Doctor Risible. She is amazing!" When her son gets like this, Inko knows she will not be able to talk until her son has hurled every word from his mouth.

"So, you know how Ms. Joke's quirk, '*Outburst*,' forces villains to burst into laughter so intense that it dulls their motor skills and cognitive abilities? Doctor Risible does the opposite. Well, not *quite* the opposite. But sort of! She manipulates emotions and causes villains to fall into such an intense state of depression that they can't function. It's terrifying! So cool!"

He digs through a new themed string bag—*when did he get that*—and pulls out the well-read events booklet. "There's a live action event about her starting soon, so I'm off. See yah!"

Inko's heart soars, watching her son speed walk around people and disappear into a different area of the museum. She is so glad he is enjoying his birthday.

"*Nerd*."

Inko furrows her eyebrows, a reprimand at her disposal as she turns towards the boy.

She stills.

Katsuki is staring off in the direction her son disappeared, a poignant and reminiscing smile nipping at his face.

“Some things never change.”

Her heart thuds in her chest, slow and heavy. She does not think he realizes he is speaking out loud. And she does not think she should have witnessed that. A private viewing of emotion she has never seen on the boy before. As fast as it settles, a neutral calm washes the smile away, masking its existence.

“Shall we check out the show then, Aunty?” he asks, looking down at his events booklet.

“O-Oh! Sure, sweetie.” Inko shakes the worries from her head. Today, she should be happy. It is a day worth being happy for her son. That not only she is celebrating, but also one of Izuku’s classmates as well.

Because it has been ten years.

Ten whole years since the last time another child celebrated her son’s birthday. It was like being quirkless was some sort of repulsive branding on his back. A warning to all of the other children that he was to be avoided. Bullied. Tormented. For being different.

No child wanted to go to her son’s fifth birthday. Why, Mitsuki had to force Katsuki to come, the child kicking and screaming that he did not want to hang out with the *useless, quirkless nobody*. Mitsuki knocked some sense into him, the way she always does. But Katsuki did not want to be there, and he made it apparent.

Inko’s son had to blow out his birthday candles next to a child who despised him and two mothers who did not know what to do.

What does a mother do in a situation like this? When no one wants to befriend her child? When they judge her precious, bright boy before ever getting to know him? When they laugh at him and beat him for having dreams like theirs?

Where did she go wrong?

Following the child who despised her son down the hall, years of helplessness—guilt, frustration, grief—pool inside of her like a vat of acid. Could she not see how uncomfortable they were, being forced to share this day once again after ten years? How could she invite this boy into her house? To be moved by a single act of kindness after years of torment?

But she remembers.

He is not the problem.

Inko breathes. “I used to be so angry with you.”

Katsuki whips his head around, confusion evident on his face, but any words he planned on speaking die on his tongue as he stares.

“I’m not stupid, Katsuki. I know you aren’t the kindest to my son. And I was mad at you for the longest time.” She finds an empty bench near the showing of Doctor Risible and pats the seat next to her.

Katsuki hesitates. Though he quickly steels himself, huffing and plopping down next to her, arms crossing and uncrossing awkwardly.

“Did you know Izuku never outright blames you?” she starts, thinking carefully of her words. “I don’t mean he never says you aren’t mean or nasty, but he never blames you for the reason behind it. He blames himself for being quirkless. For being less than.”

Katsuki stays quiet, rubbing his hands into his tights. But his eyes connect with hers as she speaks.

“And I thought that was outrageous! How can he blame himself for what others do?” Inko continues, closing her eyes for a moment. She remembers this conversation like it were yesterday. The disturbing feeling that clung to her when she realized her mistakes. “But that’s when it dawned on me. That was the moment I stopped being angry at you. My son believed that, because he wasn’t enough, others had a right to make fun of him. And that—that infesting thought—isn’t anyone’s fault but my own.”

“It is a mother’s duty to lift their child up and protect them from the world,” Inko states.

“And I failed.”

They sit in silence, watching various museumgoers pass by. Watching the Doctor Risible showing fill with interested visitors and the doors close. Children holding themed toys, touching their painted faces, and barreling down the halls. Parents running after them with amused smiles on their faces.

Inko is thankful for the silence, allowing her to calm herself. It is not uncomfortable, surprisingly. Katsuki is not exuding some sort of dark aura. Not exploding on her—as if he ever did—or defending himself. She spoke her piece, and he listened.

Katsuki does finally find his voice. “You didn’t fail at being a mother, Aunty. Believe me, your son is nothing *but* special. It annoys me that he *still* doesn’t realize how special he is. People bullied—*I bullied* your son because he threatened my very existence, I think. Not that *that* is any excuse. What I did is inexcusable. And I am sorry. All I can really do is promise to be better.”

Inko smiles inwardly. She never thought she would see the day Katsuki realizes his wrongdoings. Something, someone, has made this boy grow exponentially. She is not sure who, but she is grateful to them that he is learning and adapting.

Unfortunately, she does not get the chance to voice her appreciation.

He sighs deeply, checking the time on his phone. “I need to leave. Thank you for inviting me along, Aunty, when you obviously didn’t have to, but I think I overstayed my welcome.”

._._. **Izuku’s POV** ._._.

After several hours of exploring and learning, Izuku's mom taps him on the shoulder. She has a weary smile on her face.

"Ready to go grab dinner, honey?"

Izuku blinks, looking between the wall of text he was absorbing and his mom before nodding. "Oh, yes, of course! Sorry, mom. I got a little carried away," he chuckles nervously, lightly scratching his cheek with his finger. He looks around his mom who is clutching his borrowed sweatshirt.

"Where's Kacchan?"

His mom makes a face, pinched between guilt and embarrassment, before speaking, "He said he had some errands to finish, so he had to leave." She sighs, placing a palm on her cheek. "I really did want us all to enjoy the cake he bought together."

He offers his mom a hug, pulling the woman in tight and reveling in her familiar warmth.

It is weird. He breathes easier now that Kacchan is finally out of his hair. And yet, it is still sort of sad. Disappointing, even.

The whole day was incredibly awkward, but it was not bad. Kacchan never did lay a hand on him. Nor did he get mad at Izuku for being, well, himself. He is unsure how much of the day's awkwardness was because he has not hung out with another person his age in a long time… or if it was because the person in question was Kacchan.

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The two of them end up watching one of his favorite pro hero documentaries while eating the cake Kacchan gifted. Coincidentally, it is also about second-generation heroes! Though, saying it is one of his favorites is quite biased because he has a lot of favorite hero documentaries. Namely, all of them.

Izuku takes one bite of the cake and pauses, staring quizzically at the large slice on his small plate. He has never had this combination of cake base, fruit, and icing before.

But, somehow, it is his favorite flavor.

Chapter End Notes

> Katsuki does celebrate Izuku's birthday in the future. Sometimes, they go back to their childhood homes, they celebrate with friends, or they do something that's just them. Depends on what Izuku's feeling. He gets Izuku a cake because it's basically tradition to show up at his apartment in the wee morning with his favorite cake and fully expect the man to be there, awake, and coherent.

Starting to look like Ms. Know-It-All can’t take her own advice

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki celebrates Midoriya’s birthday with him and his mother. Awkwardly.

Song title is from “Growing Pains” by Alessia Cara.

Katsuki knows what he said. He is a man of his word.

However.

He crouches atop the ledge of an apartment building, scanning the residential and commercial areas in the dead of night.

He would like to amend his previous statement. He promises to stop this vigilante act *once school starts*.

He has about a week until his acceptance letter arrives in the mail—he will obviously get accepted in to Yuuei—and about a month or so until the school year starts.

How else will he pass the nighttime?

The written exam was easy. The practical exam was boring. He blew up so many robots, he lost count after fifty. Maybe Yuuei should challenge their prospective students *a little* more.

He shakes his head. His thoughts are distracting him from the task at hand. He continues to examine the area with squinted eyes, paying more attention to the dimly lit or unlit areas than those with adequate streetlighting.

He sees a man walk into a store. Nothing out of the ordinary.

If only the store was not closing up, and the man did not look so jumpy.

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“Hey.”

The shop owner slowly looks up, her face devoid of any other emotion than calm. She raises her hands in surrender.

A terribly skinny young man stands in front of her, illegal firearm pointed at her face. “Open the register. Everything you got; you hear me?”

She swallows thickly, but she keeps her calm. It is evident this is not her first rodeo.

“Of course. I am going to reach behind the counter now and open the register,” she narrates, lowering her hands.

To the average eye, he is a measly crook looking to skimp cash off of a hardworking and vulnerable person. But Katsuki can see the slight tremble in his hands. The tightness of his muscles knotted from the nerves. The sweat rolling down his neck. Eyes darting at every little movement.

He does not want to do this. But, for some reason, he has no other choice. Something backed him into a corner he cannot leave.

“H—” the young man’s voice cracks, and his eyes flash panicked, “H-hurry it up!”

He cannot observe this situation any longer. One wrong move, and this flight risk will become a homicide case. Katsuki slips out into the open, the store owner’s eyes shifting to his moving body.

“You sure about this?” he suddenly asks, right behind the unsuspecting young man.

The young man recoils violently, whipping around. Fear dances wildly through his eyes. “Who—what—how!?”

In the confusion, Katsuki lunges forward and easily disarms him, taking the firearm from his wobbly hands.

“Ah.” He looks like he wants to bolt. His body visibly trembles. Caught in an act gone nowhere near as planned.

Katsuki glares at the young man, eyes narrowed in disdain. He is well aware of the intensity of his eyes. Eyes that can switch from the calm before a storm to the anger of a grim reaper come to judge a lost soul. “So, what dumbassery ran through your mind to do something like this?”

“I, um, I—”

“Speak up!”

“Uh, I—”

“I see you’re having some malfunctions, so let me rephrase. I *said*,” Katsuki snaps, purposefully striding up to him. The young man shrinks in on himself, ducking his head between his knees.

Katsuki kneels in front of him and tentatively places a hand on his bony shoulder. His voice is low, but laced with concern as he speaks, “Do you need help, kid?”

The young man stills. In a moment freed from his apprehension, his eyebrows knit together in stunned confusion, and he glances up at Katsuki. Whatever expression greets him seems to hit him like a truck, and he bites his lip with regret.

“You’re obviously hurting. And this,” Katsuki lifts the disarmed firearm secured in his other hand, “This isn’t the answer. It doesn’t have to be. So, let me help you.”

And everything that was bottled up in the young man’s malnourished body explodes into the air. His face screws up as if he were stung, tears pricking his scrunched eyes.

“I’m sorry! Please don’t hate me… I just—I didn’t know what else to do. My little brother… he said he was hungry.” He looks between their stares and laughs humorlessly.

“You don’t *get* it. You won’t get it. My little brother is the nicest person on the planet.”

“He doesn’t complain when the water shuts off. Or when we can’t have heat during winter. Or when other kids get to go to school and play together, but run from him. He just accepts it. And my little brother—a *five-year-old* who learned he can’t have things like other kids, who never complains—said he was *hungry*.” The young man breathes a shuddering exhale, eyes trained on the tile floor.

“I’m such a horrible brother. The one thing I could give him was food. No matter how I could get it. I can’t let him feel like he can’t have that too. It’s not fair to him. It’s not fair at all.”

The store is silent as the explosion settles. The smoke is suffocating. Katsuki’s hand leaves his shoulder, and he whimpers at the loss, shoving his head back between his knees.

“Child, what’s your name?” the store owner asks. Her voice is as even as it was the moment the man opened the door.

“H-Haru. It’s Haru.”

“Please raise your head, Haru. I’m not mad.”

Haru takes a minute before he peeks up from the floor, tears and snot streaming down his hollowed face. The store owner is kneeling in front of him.

“My name is Chiaki. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I-It’s nice to meet you?” Haru replies, his stumbling voice etched with uncertainty.

“How are you doing?”

“I—”

“—Because I am *exhausted*. I don’t like working late, and I don’t like running a store by myself. My back hurts. My feet hurt. My wrist hurts. And don’t get me started on nasty customers,” Chiaki complains, hands thrown in the air. She looks directly at Haru, a smile crinkling her weary face. “I could really use some help.”

“Wh-what?”

“I could use an assistant. Someone who can help me manage at my age. Now, it is ultimately your decision, and I won’t make it easy, but it will be honest work. And I own the small apartment above this store. I’ve never used the place—more of a storage room, really. So, if you and your little brother would like to stay up there, I can easily move some things around. It’s heated and has running water.” She pauses. “My cooking is inedible some days, but I’m sure we can figure it out.”

“I… You want to help me? But I just…”

“Water under the bridge.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“But—”

“—Son, I’m dying here. I don’t like doing two AM intake and inventory when I open the store at five. So?”

Haru hiccups, an arm slides across his wet nose, and he sniffles loudly. But he is nodding his head like crazy.

“I’m so sorry for everything. Thank you, Miss. Thank you so much.”

Katsuki vanishes from the store before either of the two realizes.

He dismantles and throws the firearm in three different rivers.

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“Fifteen.”

Katsuki rides the bounce of the slackline tied between two trees in the backyard. Sweat slides down the side of his face. At the rise of the walking rope, he jumps and backflips, catching himself on one foot back on the rope.

“Sixteen.”

Honestly, he is just fucking around between training regimes. He wants to see how many backflips he can land before he loses his balance.

“Katsuki?”

The gentle tone of his father’s voice calls to him from the sliding backyard door, a large envelope in his hands. His Yuuei acceptance letter no doubt.

“Be right there,” he replies, easily hopping off the rope. It bounces without his weight before evening out.

He takes the envelope from his father’s extended hands and dodges his mother’s probing ones.

“Don’t avoid me, you little shit!”

“You want to be covered in my sweat? Be my fucking guest,” he snaps, hopping over the back of the couch. His parents crowd behind him.

The envelope contains a packet of papers and an electronic puck. And the second Katsuki sets the puck on the coffee table in front of him, a holographic All Might clad in a striped suit barges into their space.

“Is this thing on?” All Might questions, his face getting too close to whoever is filming.

“I-it is, sir!”

“Oh! Dear, young Katsuki Bakugou! With a perfect score on the written exam and the highest score of 84 points on the practical exam, congratulations! Come on down, my boy! Yuuei is now your hero academia!”

Katsuki blinks. A teasing snort belatedly escapes his nose at All Might’s exaggerated movements and facial expressions. Does he do this for every acceptance letter? Sounds about right for him.

His father’s arms tenderly wrap around him from behind the couch. “I am so proud of you, Kats. I know you’ve being working hard for this every day. I knew you could do it,” Masaru praises, his voice blossoming pride in Katsuki’s chest. Even at his age, praise from his father never fails to make him feel capable.

As soon as Masaru pulls away, Mitsuki, already jumping in excitement, slaps him on the back a few times.

“And he said top scores? That’s my kid, all right! Nothing less than the best,” she brags, eyes lit up in glee.

Katsuki rolls his eyes. He was competing against prepubescent children. This victory was guaranteed.

However, he is not opposed to his father’s request to go out to eat and celebrate.

._._. **A Few Days After the Night Stalker Incidents** ._._.

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/brokebacknomountain · 12h

Hey, it’s me, Himari Takahashi. Since I can’t find the posts for this vigilante (hoodie and face mask guy), I’m starting a new one. And it’s a long one. Because I am the first survivor and the last victim of the Night Stalker…

…and I have nothing better to do in this hospital bed, so I’m telling my story. It’s MY story, so you should hear it from ME. On a totally unrelated note, my surgeries and physical therapy are free.

The Night Stalker is not who people think. He wasn’t a mastermind villain the pros couldn’t catch. Nor was he an elusive serial killer of the night. He was just a creepy stalker holding flowers.

I was walking home late from work because my boss is evil. And this guy would not stop pestering me. I just wanted to go home and snuggle with my dog. I was so tired, please don’t judge me, but I humored him for a minute. He said he had something quick to say to me.

Standing by the side of a building, away from everyone—I’m a legislative assistant, guys, I am smart—I should’ve realized my mistake. But I was so tired. He was breathing hard and stood too close. And he asked me out. Like any sane person, I refused and turned to leave.

I think he hit me over the head with something because, the next thing, I’m waking up in a teetering chair with my neck chained up like some private hanging. No, not “like.” He was going to hang

me.

When he noticed I woke up, he started going on and on about how "too many females can't identify a nice guy even if one walked right up to her." And it was his "duty to cull all the whores of the world, so decent men can find pure wives, not succubae." If I wasn't so scared for my life, I would've laughed. He obviously practiced this speech to make me look like the one in the wrong here. Did every victim have to listen to this monologue? Please, spare me your sob story.

And then he kicked out my chair, and I was choking to death.

It's not something I want to discuss further. I thought I was going to die because I rejected one guy.

But, thankfully, our vigilante broke the chain from where it was secured on the floor, and I could breathe again. I never thought I'd miss the feeling of concrete under my feet.

But my stalker went feral. And he cloned himself 15 times over. 15 times. There were 16 creepy men, angry and barreling towards our vigilante. You don't get how crazy it was. He fought really hard, but nothing our guy did stopped those persistent clones. They wouldn't disappear. And after a while he didn't have the upper hand anymore.

And then they realized I was still there too.

I honestly can't tell what was worse. Having to listen to five of the same stalker repeatedly call me derogatory words, or the fact that they beat and kicked me so hard, something snapped in my spine. I couldn't feel my legs anymore. I couldn't feel anything after that. I could only watch.

The remaining 10 clones hurled our vigilante into a wall as their creator watched, and when he hit the concrete, he grabbed this scrap metal and stabbed one of the clones in the chest.

And it disappeared!

It turned out, stabbing them did the trick. And once the stalker realized our guy knew it, he was terrified. Like the undead, our vigilante rose and stabbed every single one of them with this rusted piece of scrap metal. I'm not saying they didn't put up a fight, but it was a useless fight.

And, man, was our vigilante pissed. If only you could've seen him. He was like some sort of demonic creature, punishing those who wandered into his abandoned building.

He turned to the real stalker, who, mind you, was quaking in his boots and yelling at our vigilante that his cause was just and right. And he chucks the scrap metal at the guy and stabs him through the shoulder. The guy was so distracted by the pain, he didn't see our vigilante stumble up to him until it was too late.

I watched him punch the stalker's lights out until his fist was as red as his eyes and the Night Stalker had no front teeth left.

I'm embarrassed to say I was scared when he rounded on me. My stalker was out cold behind him, and he was hobbling over to me. They really did a number on him, but I was still a little scared.

What was I going to do, though? Run away? Lol.

He dropped to his knees in front of me and apologized. For being late. When I tell you, I was taken aback…? This wasn't his fault?? So, why was he the one saying sorry? He saved me.

He even called the police and paramedics for me. But everyone, he was so sad. Like he failed me or something.

I could've been dead. Dead because I let a creepy guy talk me into an alley. Dead because I told a serial killer I didn't want to date him.

And the doctors say I've got a great chance of walking again after my second surgery.

If I could've opened my mouth, if I could've said anything, I would've thanked him. If our vigilante ever sees this post, seriously, dude, thank you.

No one else was there, but YOU were. My life exploded into a million pieces, and the only one there for me—the only one standing at ground zero—was you.

357k upvotes · 249 comments

…

[Best Comments]

starryeyesinthenight · 5h

Holy shit. I am so sorry for what happened to you. I saw your story in the Musutafu Times. I am glad you are on the road to recovery, first and foremost. Second, I'm happy your surgery is paid for, but did you know who paid for it? And who's taking credit for saving you? I didn't know our vigilante saved you. This third-rate hero, the Builder, took credit for everything. It was all over the news. And his hero office is the one paying for your surgery. Fuck him.

Edit: OMG this whole thread got blasted around social media and picked up by the Musutafu Tribune and Channel 8! The Builder's in it deep now hahaha #banthebuilder

155k upvotes · 97 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| dbsdbs · 3h

|| *Screw him. But I also saw on another hero site that the Hero Commission is holding a series of meetings about the increase in vigilantism, and they may start cracking down harder… Which is such bull! They're only doing this because Ground Zero is gaining more traction, and their stupid hero messed up. I really hope he doesn't get caught in it… #groundzeroarmy*

|| 93k upvotes · 65 replies

|||| piratebooties270 · 28m

|||| *Is that what we're calling him now? #groundzeroarmy*

._._. **A Couple of Hours After the Night Stalker Incidents** ._._.

Katsuki stares a hole into the shower floor, watching the water dilute his blood under the spray.

Anger bubbles in his chest, hot and corrosive, and he clenches his hands into fists. That fucking bastard should feel *blessed* he had the control to not blow up his face.

Let us review the facts. First, he arrived late at the scene. Second, he got his ass beat by a deranged man. And third, he let an innocent civilian get severely injured.

He does not need to be a doctor to know that woman cannot walk. She cannot walk because he was too slow to realize something was amiss. He saw the guy walk into the abandoned building, tugging along a large metal suitcase, and he did not think much of it. Not until he was three blocks away, and something inside him begged for him to turn back and check it out.

That fucker was *hanging* her from her neck. And Katsuki saw red.

Did any of his other victims even live? She could not be the first, not with how comfortable he was using that place.

Is he losing his touch as a pro? Spending too much time lazing around in this reverted life, this reverted age? Worrying about trivial things like training for a high school entrance exam? Designing his hero-in-training uniform? *Relaxing* on Sundays?

It has been nearly a year since he was dropped back in time.

His body is fifteen years old, his mind thirty. He trains himself to the best of his ability during the day and saves as many people as he can muster at night.

It is not enough.

Is it because he gave himself the silly provision of not using his quirk? Should he start using his quirk at night?

No.

His decision was correct—is still correct. His quirk is too flashy. Someone with a keen eye can figure it out. Especially if he makes any waves as a high school student. Someone can put two-and-two together. Besides, he said he will stop once school starts—Katsuki freezes.

What is today's date?

He stops the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist and grabbing his phone.

Fuck.

Villains have the *worst* timing. Of course, it is four in the morning on his first day at Yuuei.

He is ninety percent sure he has a mild concussion. Those clones kicked him good. And they nicked the side of his head. A small but deep gash slices through his left temple, still bleeding out of the shower and hours later.

His hand is definitely sprained, most likely fractured if the severe swelling is any indication. He flexes his right hand, grimacing at the shooting pain that runs from his knuckles through his wrist.

And his ribs are bruised; one is *possibly* broken. He tried to block the beatings the best he could, but there is only so much you can do quirkless against sixteen guys.

Katsuki assesses the rest of the damage in the bathroom mirror. Several black and purple bruises splatter across his body. His nose stopped bleeding fairly quickly, now only bruised. There are no other gashes. He chuckles.

He looks like he got hit by a car.

He takes a deep breath. His eyebrow twitches as pain blooms in his ribs.

This is fine. This is *easy*. He can stitch up the gash, and his bangs will hide the evidence. Head wounds bleed more than they are worth, so it is not concerning. His mother shares the same complexion as he, so he can borrow her makeup to hide the bruising on his face. A little swelling to his face does not look any different from the baby fat already there. Everything else will be well hidden under his uniform.

And he will wrap up his right hand to the best of his ability and deal with it.

This is not the worst pain he has endured. He has fought brutal villains in worse conditions and won. And if the school day starts for students and teachers, it starts for staff as well. He can visit Recovery Girl to kiss away the pain of his larger injuries.

Though, he is not stupid enough to go to her before school. He knows, the second she heals him, he will be out like a light. Months of training and no sleep will catch up to him in no time. So, that is an After-School Katsuki problem.

Even he would regret skipping his first day.

._._.

Katsuki pats his hair over the stitches and thin bandage on his left temple.

It has been a while since he last stitched anyone up. As most pros do, he had first aid and first response training to help stabilize injured civilians and heroes before the real medics arrive. But the last time he had to suture someone was Shouto during an undercover mission. They had no means of getting to a hospital any time soon.

Katsuki shakes his head. That man needs to be more aware of his surroundings.

He walks out of the train station closest to Yuuei, starting to get used to the shooting and bursting pain with every step. Abusing an ibuprofen pill bottle does wonders.

His parents will be sad they missed him leave for his first day, but having them find him in this state would be worse. He will leave later in the morning tomorrow.

Katsuki stops at the entrance of Yuuei. He takes in the enormous buildings, full of nothing but glass panels and connected by indoor walkways. The rows of trees and concrete arches lining the pathway. The humongous doors to accommodate all sizes. He knows he returned to this school for the first time during the entrance exams, but this is different. He closes his eyes and sighs.

He really is attending high school all over again.

Does this mean he should stop calling these kids, well, “kids”? They are technically teenagers—*he* is (physically) a teenager. He huffs. Minors are minors. They all look the same age when you are thirty.

He is the first to arrive to Class 1-A. Not surprising. The school day starts at eight in the morning, and he is gingerly settling into his assigned seat a quarter after seven.

He pulls out a piece of paper and a pen. He always thought being ambidextrous would help him with his quirk control, and he is glad he carried through on that thought. He scribbles out an arbitrary sentence on the paper with his left hand. The words are a little unruly but manageable.

Red splatters on the white page.

Katsuki feels frustration climb his spine at the sight. He wipes the thin trail of blood trickling down the side of his face with his thumb, rising from his desk. Good thing he thought to bring extra bandages because this one did not last as long as he thought.

Sliding into the first restroom he sees, Katsuki pushes his hair out of his face, assessing the damage. The bandage is dark, full. He gently pulls it off and tosses it into the trash. His stitches are holding perfectly fine.

Damn head wounds.

He dabs the fresh blood and cleans up the area before replacing the bandage, patting his hair back over the wound. It has to stop bleeding sometime. Are younger bodies not supposed to bounce back quick? He has been very happy not dealing with the random creaks in his joints. The extra energy is nice too. So, can his body get the memo on injury recovery?

When Katsuki returns to the classroom, some students are sitting in their seats, trying to mask their first day jitters. The future talk show host is there. Tail boy too. And more arms more problems. My chemical crowmance—*okay*, he will learn their names this time around.

He knew their names at one point in his life, but he does not talk to most of his high school class in the future. He burned those relationships, and the only classmates left are Eijirou, Izuku, and Shouto. He and Camie really hit it off when she started working at Genius. Or, more accurately, she latched on, and he cannot shake her off.

But these are their younger selves. All of his classmates, reverted to the teenage versions of the people they become. Who says they will be friends again? Who says he wants to hang around these foreign versions of his friends, holding out for an inkling of hope that they will be the people he craves?

Katsuki swings his feet atop his desk, irritated the pain shooting from his ribs is not distracting *enough*, and he teeters in his chair slowly. He stares aimlessly at the ceiling, a weariness settling over his body as his mind continues to pester him.

Maybe he should not try.

Regardless, he will always be fifteen years older. Fifteen years off. He will never stop being a man out of time. They are probably better off without him.

"*What*—Don't put your legs on the desk!" someone shouts in his ear, and he jerks violently in his seat.

Katsuki feels the weightlessness of his body falling backwards, and he shoots his hand out, grabbing the desk behind him. Grabbing the desk with his definitely sprained, increasingly

fractured, hand.

He inhales sharply through his nose and clamps his jaw shut to stop the scream curling in his throat. There is not enough ibuprofen in the world.

Tiny explosions pop in his free hand as he pushes himself forward, his chair and feet slamming into the floor.

“Don’t you think that’s disrespectful to your classmates?” the boy scolds, his arm slicing the air with a robotic chopping motion.

Is he above beating a child? At this moment, he is unsure.

He points at the four-eyed idiot who is oblivious to his dilemma and his throbbing hand.

“Turn around and walk away before I do something I’ll regret,” Katsuki threatens in a clipped voice, a tight grimace on his face.

The boy splutters in surprise. “How can you say—and *you* want to be a hero?”

These are very trying times, Katsuki sees.

He is about to stand up, but before he can move, a nervous squeak grabs everyone’s attention to the door. The boy swerves from his conversation with Katsuki and makes a beeline for Midoriya.

“You! Hello! I’m Tenya Iida from Soumei Junior High School.” Iida extends a hand.

Katsuki sinks in his chair. The fact that Midoriya saved him from getting expelled on his first day means he needs to cool the fuck down. They are just kids who do not know that even breathing hurts right now.

He tries to tune out the chirps and happy chatter of Midoriya, Iida, and now Uraraka at the front of the class and the rest of his class behind him. A migraine starts to break his ibuprofen stronghold and blur his vision a bit.

He swears internally. He better make it through the day, or else.

·_·_·

He respects Aizawa. He does.

However.

The class stands outside on the P.E. grounds for an impromptu quirk appraisal. They have eight physical tests to complete, and the lowest performing student will be expelled.

Katsuki’s eye twitches. Expulsion is an obvious lie, but the fact that he needs to perform at his best is still apparent.

He should have punched that asshole ten more times for this.

“Bakugou,” Aizawa suddenly calls, stirring him from his internal brooding. “How far could you pitch a softball in middle school?”

Katsuki raises an eyebrow. Why would he know that? He pauses. No, actually, his younger self has every stat imaginable written down in a notebook he glossed over months ago.

“I don’t know?”

“Um, 70 meters, Mr. Aizawa!” He whips his head around at the sound of Midoriya’s voice like a madman.

“How the hell—you—no, never mind. I don’t want to know how you know,” he says, trying to reel in his exasperation, exhaling deeply. He turns to Aizawa. “You heard the little shit.”

“Language,” his teacher warns. “Try using your quirk this time around. As long as you don’t exit the throwing circle, anything you do is fine.”

Katsuki looks at the electronic softball in his hand, tossing it lightly to get the hang of using his left hand. All right, this is going to hurt regardless, so he might as well go all out. He will add a good amount of combustion force behind the throw and adjust the pitch a bit.

Sucking in air, he winds up his body and flings the softball with one of his larger explosions slamming into it, bellowing his signature catchphrase of motivation.

“Die!”

The blowback of his explosion wracks through his body, his eyes glossing over even more. *Worth it*.

Remind him to add pain endurance to his training regime. Although avoiding getting hurt on the job is a top priority, it can be inevitable sometimes. This body needs to catch up to his mind. The discrepancy is frustrating. He should be good at working through pain.

Aizawa shows the stunned class the small screen in his hand. “725 meters. This is a rational metric that will form the basis of your hero foundation.”

The tests are not difficult. Long jumping. Fifty-meter dash. Seated toe-touch. Just typical tests they administer during a school gym class. He does his best. It would be nice to have a running list of his stats coming into high school, so he knows where he needs to focus his training.

He clicks his tongue. It would be *better* if he were actually in top shape though. But he cannot have everything.

And, as he suspected, no one is expelled.

But, somehow, Midoriya broke his finger. *How* did he break his finger? Katsuki stares at the boy cradling the digit with his other hand, looking proud because he is *still standing* after hurtling that softball through the air.

Kid, your finger looks burnt purple. You are not winning any prizes for that.

Is All Might teaching him how to control his quirk or not? Because that does not look like control. Hell, with the deep conversations, analyses conducted, and sparring sessions between Izuku and he these past fifteen years, Katsuki can teach Midoriya how to use his *quirks* better than All Might.

He will just have to explain how he knows all of this confidential information.

·_·_·

Katsuki walks to the nurse's office, hands shoved into his pants pockets. If Aizawa noticed he was off his game, he could have forced him to see Recovery Girl before the performance tests.

He hesitates at the entrance of the nurse's office, rapping his knuckles against the doorframe before entering.

Recovery Girl sits at her desk and flips through a thick packet of paperwork, her eyes flickering to his figure. "Oh, hello. I'm Chiyo Shuzenji, but you may call me Recovery Girl. What's your name, child?"

"Katsuki Bakugou, 1-A. I have some minor injuries from personal training."

She sifts through a stack of papers in a desk divider and pulls out a blank student record chart.

"Okay, and can you describe how your injuries happened?"

Katsuki rubs the back of his neck, a line of bullshit forming on his tongue. "Yes. I was practicing flight with my quirk, and I slammed into a tree, so I have bruising all over my body. And I landed on my hand wrong, so it's swelled a bit."

"Major areas of discomfort?"

"Probably my ribs." Probably?

"Hm." Recovery Girl continues to scribble notes on the record chart. And another student's shoes shuffle into the office.

"Oh. Kacchan," Midoriya says from somewhere behind him.

Katsuki does not turn around. He is still irritated about the softball stat. Just a bit. He scowls at the white wall in front of him.

"What."

"Mr. Aizawa sent me to get my finger checked out! That's all," the boy replies defensively, and Katsuki can almost hear the gears turning in his mind.

Breathe, Katsuki. Be *nice*.

Well, if his brain stops tearing itself to pieces, he will start being nice.

Recovery Girl finishes filling out his record chart and joins him in the middle of the room.

"Okay, deary, this will only take a minute," she tells him. "You may feel a little woozy afterwards."

Oh, she is starting now.

"I might want to be on that bed—" he begins to recommend, but Recovery Girl kisses his cheek.

He blacks out on impact.

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Katsuki's Events Notebook

1. *Sludge villain incident [added: Deku gets OFA]*
2. *Yuuei entrance exams [added: waste of time]*
3. *Graduated middle school*
4. *Did I win the Sports Festival my first year?*
5. *Kidnapped by League of Extras*
6. *The War for All ends*
7. *Graduated high school*
8. *Future heroes fellowship stationed in India and China*
9. *Returned to Japan*
10. ...

I’m way too young to lie here forever; I’m way too old to try so whatever

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki collects a bittersweet victory, a ton of fans, and a vigilante name. He also attends his first day of school half-beaten to death. Details. Details.

Thank you for reading! You guys give me so many ideas to consider in the comments. Song title is “Bang!” by AJR.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Flashback: Year 2024/2031)

Katsuki stares at the letter in his hands. His hands currently shaking from increasing frustration.

Who did that shitty nerd think he was? How did he even find him?

For fuck’s sake, Katsuki is stationed in Delhi, India, now. No one has his address.

He exhales sharply, debating on detonating the envelop between his fingertips as he sheds his jacket and shoes at the entrance of his apartment.

After the war, Deku officially left Yuuei. There was a big, sappy going-away party for the nerd as he prepared to leave for the States. He was going to finish high school and attend university over there, alongside his mother.

On the other hand, Katsuki finished his time at Yuuei and graduated with flying colors. He stuck it out, watching Japan try to rebuild with glue and tape.

He received an international fellowship, the Future Heroes Fellowship, which provided him with an escape too. ~~To run away with his tail between his legs after his pathetic performance during the war.~~ To attend university and practice as a pro hero in India and China. To learn how heroes across the continent of Asia become the best of the best. He got to choose his mentors for each two-year period in each country, and he chose Miruko for India and Best Jeanist for China.

He is still surprised Miruko agreed. She is a very independent hero. But so is he. Maybe that is why it worked? In the field, they complement each other, working together but autonomously. And once she got used to having a protégé, she excelled at guiding him. Though, he can tell, two years away from Japan is pushing her kindness.

Katsuki dumps the rest of his mail on his dining table and his day backpack on the couch.

With the exception of his parents, he did not tell anyone he was leaving. He simply left.

Even his parents do not have his home address. He knows his mother will kill him for that when he returns to Japan.

So, that begs the question: how the fuck does the nerd know? Fucking stalker.

And what? What can he possibly have to say to Katsuki? This letter can be a lot of things. It can be a formal emancipation from his former bully. It can be a mockery of Katsuki for being a weak dipshit during the war. The war Deku ended himself.

Instead, it is just a simple message.

"Dear Kacchan,

How are you doing?

I'm doing great! I go to the same university All Might did, and I made some new friends. They have amazing quirks! But I won't bore you with my excitement.

They did make me try a Twinkie for the first time. I don't recommend it. Twizzlers are next though!

Anyways, I don't expect an answer, but I did want to reach out.

Best,

Izuku

PS: Don't be so alarmed. I contacted Miruko for your address information."

Katsuki scowls at the letter in his hand, crumpling it slightly.

A letter is such a frail olive branch. Deku could have called or texted, but writing a letter is different. It is an intimate act with cautious boundaries. Time needed to process, send, and deliver.

It says, "I do not want to hear your voice, but I do want to hear from you."

His scowl deepens.

Katsuki wants to burn it.

He pulls out a pen and paper.

But when he seats himself at his desk, he is no longer in his apartment in Delhi.

He is older, and he returned to Japan.

Katsuki scrolls on his phone, sitting in one of the office chairs in Genius' inter-agency conference room. As always, he arrived too early to the next mission brief.

Something cold pokes the back of his neck.

He jolts, narrowing his eyes and scowling at the snickers erupting from behind him.

"Deku," he growls. "What'd I tell you about your cold-ass fingers?"

“Not to do that?” Izuku answers in a teasing question, the smile evident in his voice.

“Yes.”

“But it’s funny?”

“You piece of shit,” Katsuki spits, but Izuku just snickers again, and plops down in the seat next to him.

He leans closer, propping his chin on the palm of his hand and peers at Katsuki’s phone. “What’re you looking at?”

“Chirper. We’re trending again,” he says, and Izuku groans.

“What is it this time?” he whines, stretching out his arms on the round table in front of them.

“Remember when you used Black Whip to throw me at that stone villain?” he starts, and Izuku nods, curious. Katsuki shows him his phone screen. “Well, someone caught it on video.” And added more fuel to the public dumpster fire on their beloved “Wonder Duo.”

Izuku immediately bites his lip as he scrolls through the chirps. But it is not enough to stop him from bursting out laughing. “#DekuFlingsDynamight… When Dynamight breaks Deku’s limited edition All Might figure… When Dynamight and Deku butted heads at the 96th Annual Hero Gala—oh my god, Kacchan, these are gold.”

“Yeah, so never do that again.”

“You’re the one who asked me to!”

·–·–·

His eyelids are heavy.

He uses too much energy just to pry them open. The natural light seeping into his bedroom is also too bright. His covers are pulled up to his chin, his school bag and uniform folded on top of his dresser.

His entire body is sore. The type of sore that develops from training like a maniac and hibernating afterwards. His body screams in agony. Anger. He remembers how nice sleep can be, and he is ravenous. Deprived.

He turns his head to the side and sees his father scratching away on a tablet and laptop setup. Probably working on his parents’ new clothing collection. Katsuki is thankful for their demanding jobs because he could not sneak out as much as he does without them being so distracted by work.

His father perks up as he notices his son trying to sit up in his bed. He almost drops his stylus, fumbling with the pen before placing it on Katsuki’s desk and saving his work.

“Oh, Kats, you’re awake,” Masaru notes, relieved. “You gave us such a scare there.”

Katsuki stretches his whining muscles, his face scrunching at their demanding aches and pains.

“What happened? How’d I get home?” he asks. He grabs his charging phone from the nightstand and checks the time, cringing at the lit screen. How is it already tomorrow in the afternoon? “Are you serious?”

His father gingerly sits at the edge of his bed. “Your school nurse, Ms. Shuzenji, gave us a call at work when you passed out in her office,” he explains, frowning a bit. “You were very hurt, Kats. She said you had multiple broken bones, full-body bruising, and a gash on your forehead? This was from training?”

Multiple broken bones. So, his hand really was broken, not sprained. And he must have suffered broken ribs instead of bruised ones. At least they never realized he was mildly concussed.

“I fell.” Katsuki winces at how horribly cliché that explanation sounds. “I was practicing flying with my quirk, and I overshot myself into a tree. It was fucking embarrassing, and I didn’t want anyone to know.”

There was a time when he abhorred liars. When did he stop?

“Katsuki…” his father trails off, his voice laced with concern. “I never liked all this training.”

Masaru rests the palm of his hand on Katsuki’s cheek, a thumb tracing just below one of his eyes. “You have such horrible dark circles under your eyes… Is this from training too?”

The back of his hand presses against his forehead. “You’re warm too. I can call the doctor for a home visit.”

Katsuki shakes his head, gently pulling his father’s hand away from his face. “You don’t have to baby me, Dad.” He flexes both of his hands. There is barely any pain. “Recovery Girl healed me up perfectly.”

His father is quiet for a moment. “Please don’t overdo it again.”

“I have to train—”

“But not like that. Not so much that it hurts you,” his father cuts him off. His gentle voice is firm. Absolute.

Katsuki looks out the window. There is only one act he can stop to ensure he does not suffer injuries so severe again. His heart thuds heavy in his chest, his hands pulsing to the beat.

He thinks about the black hoodie and face mask hanging together deep in his closet. The drunk woman who reminded him he is a hero first, and a fractured man last. The McMight employee he protected from being stabbed. The man who accidentally pissed off someone thrice his size. The scared young man taken in by the store owner he tried to rob. The woman who sacrificed her mobility at the hands of a corrupt lunatic.

He swallows against a dry throat.

He does not want to. He is worried about who he will revert to if he does.

“Fine.”

His father smiles lightly, placing a hand on his shoulder as he rises from the bed. “Thank you, Kats. How about I make you something to eat, and we can spend the rest of the day relaxing at home? How does that sound?”

“Sounds great, Dad.”

·_·_·

Katsuki barely makes it to class on time. He blames his parents who suddenly want to sit down and eat breakfast together. They are really pushing this bonding time. Katsuki rolls his eyes. It will not last, not with their busy schedules. He just needs to bide his time.

He also blames the annoying press forming hordes outside of the school gates. Trying to get a peek at All Might in action. They tried to stop him and ask him questions about All Might as a teacher. Until they realized he was the victim from the sludge villain incident and tried to pester him with questions about that as well. They are lucky he and his big mouth could slip away so easily. Fucking extras.

The second he steps through the classroom entrance, Midoriya shoots up from his seat.

“Kacchan, you’re okay!”

Why would he not be?

His eyebrows knit together in confusion as the whole class turns to stare curiously at him. Then, it hits him. This little shit watched him fold like a lawn chair in the nurse’s office two days ago.

“Wait, what happened? What’re you talking about, Deku?” Uraraka asks, currently sitting in his assigned seat.

Midoriya opens his mouth to speak, but Katsuki sends him a withering look. He clamps his mouth shut.

Katsuki huffs and strides to his seat, placing his bag on his desk and narrowing his eyes at the two of them before turning to the whole class.

“You see this,” he starts, gesturing to Midoriya and Uraraka, “Making friends is such a *wonderful* act. Practically *priceless*. You know what else is priceless? Minding your own damn business.” He cuts his eyes to Uraraka. “*Up*.”

She springs from his chair and scurries back to hers.

Not long after he sits down, Aizawa walks through the classroom door.

“Hope you’re rested from yesterday’s battle trial,” he starts. Katsuki raises an eyebrow. He *is* rested, but not for the same reasons. He must have missed their first heroics exercise yesterday. “I took the liberty of looking at your marks and evaluations, which I’ll pass back now.”

Aizawa pauses at Katsuki’s desk. “Bakugou, see me in the teacher’s lounge during lunch.” He does not wait for an answer before turning to Midoriya. “Midoriya, I’ve already said this. Don’t make me say it a third time. If you keep going, ‘I can’t adjust my quirk, so I have no choice,’ then you won’t get far. Once you’ve cleared this hurdle, you’ll be much more versatile. But you have to work for it.”

“Yes, sir!”

Okay, so he missed something important yesterday while he was watching horror movies with his father. Big enough that Midoriya could not control his quirk. Yet again.

After Aizawa finishes his comments, he returns to the front of the class. “Now that the evaluations are complete, let’s move on to the homeroom notices. Sorry to spring this on you.” He shuffles some papers on the podium.

“But we need to pick a class president.”

“Oh, god, I thought it was a pop quiz,” Katsuki hears Kaminari whisper.

·_·_·

Katsuki sits across the table from Aizawa, Hound Dog, and Recovery Girl in the teacher’s lounge. It seems the rest of the teachers have lunch or teaching duties.

He was not sure what this meeting was about, and why he needs to meet with Aizawa—with all three teachers and staff—but the more he sits quietly in his chair as they settle in theirs, the more suspicious he becomes.

He looks between the three of them. His homeroom teacher. The lifestyle guidance counselor. The nurse. He blinks owlishly.

Oh fuck no.

They have to be kidding. He holds up his hand. “Before you even think about it, *no*, I am not self-harming. *No*, I am not being abused at home. And, *no*, I am not a part of some delinquent group. I face planted a tree,” he says bitterly, glaring at each of them. He stands. “If those are your main concerns, I think this meeting is over.”

“Bakugou, sit down,” Aizawa sighs, rubbing his dry eyes.

He sits, crossing his arms.

“Sweetie, you had three broken ribs, a broken hand, intense bruising across your body, and a deep gash on your forehead that looked *self-stitched*,” Recovery Girl lists. She looks at him with disbelieving eyes.

“That’s not a question.”

She wants to hit him with her cane, he can tell. “All from a *tree*?”

Katsuki shrugs. “Those branches could fight.”

Hound Dog tries to cover his laugh with a cough.

“Be serious, kid,” Aizawa warns.

“Yes.”

They stare at each other, unmoving. Letting the clock on the wall tick by. Of course, they are not going to budge.

Katsuki claps his hands together and exhales.

“Look, I appreciate the concern. It was my first day, and I looked like a court case,” he pauses to reel in the snark in his voice. “I’m being serious. It was a personal training accident. I already received a tongue lashing from my old man, which is why I took yesterday off from school. To *rest*. Your concern is misplaced.”

This will be the first and last time he goes to Recovery Girl to heal him from vigilante-related activities… which he is not continuing per his father’s concern.

Aizawa relents after a moment. “Don’t make a habit of too much personal training. You have bags under your eyes.”

Katsuki presses his lips into a line to physically stop himself from retorting with, “Paper or plastic?” If he wants this meeting to end, he needs to keep it together. Cut the shit already.

But it is so difficult to take this situation seriously.

As if sensing the sarcastic comment on the tip of his tongue, his teacher narrows his eyes. “Don’t train at the expense of your health.”

“I know.”

The school sirens blare through the loudspeakers.

Katsuki jumps into a defensive position immediately. “What’s happening?”

“Security level three has been breached. Students, please promptly evacuate.”

Aizawa runs toward the door. “Someone’s infiltrated the school grounds. Bakugou, with me. I’m getting you out of here first.”

Katsuki nods curtly—shoving the ugly feelings of frustration from being treated like a mere civilian down his throat—and follows his teacher out of the school.

To see hordes of news reporters mulling about, searching for All Might.

When he hears Aizawa sigh loudly, he feels sorry for the man. He has to deal with the mess they made.

But how did the press breach the school’s security system?

·_·_·

Katsuki crouches on the ledge of a rooftop, fixing his face mask under a blanket of darkness.

He does not need to stop. He needs to be more careful. That is all.

·_·_·

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/pandamanda · 5h

[**GZ**] Not my proudest moment…

…BUT who wouldn't do what I did?! I saw Ground Zero jumping across buildings, and I screamed. It was the first time I ever saw him! And I may have been a little drunk, but details, details. I follow his activity in this sub-heroddit, and on Chirper and Zo's Hero Blog. I mean, Musutafu finally got an interesting vigilante! Obviously, I'm going to follow him! I should've taken a picture ahhhhh

He really needs a different outfit though lol. Something with more pizazz. Well, I guess he is trying to blend in, so no one catches him. I'll let it slide. For now (anyone want to brainstorm outfit designs for him??).

Also, I don't think he knows we named him or that the army exists lol. It was funny—he tripped when I tried to get his attention (SORRY GZ), and he was looking around, like, SO confused hahaha

Anyways, as a consolation prize for acting like an idiot in front of our vigilante, get your Ground Zero pins here (URL LINK).

119K upvotes · 111 comments

…

[Best Comments]

harryshairylegs · 5h

Is it a requirement to be drunk to spot our vigilante or something?

57K upvotes · 47 replies

…

[Newest Comments]

bombsquad555 · 3h

I don't get why you're all going crazy over this guy. He's just some quirkless hero wannabe. All Might would instantly body him in a fight. One actually capable villain, and he's just a statistic. Sad, really.

1.1K upvotes · 345 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| dbsdbs · 3h

|| *I'm sure he could body you, so does it matter? #groundzeroarmy*

|| 45K upvotes · 18 replies

|||| groundzerosfacemask · 1h

|||| *Oh no, the girls are fighting.*

·_·_·

Katsuki sits cross-legged on his bed, his hands clasped together in his lap. The lights are off. He has yet to remove his vigilante outfit; the black face mask still covering half of his face, his hood still pulled over his head. His phone is face down on his bed. And he stares at the offending device, biting the inside of his lip.

This vigilante act may have been a mistake.

Somehow, he has acquired an internet following. People post his endeavors on this app called, "Heroddit," less so on other hero blogs and social media. How did he obtain a fanbase? *Why* did he obtain a fanbase? He is not a pro hero in this context. He runs around in a face mask and beats up smalltime villains. Surely, he is not worth keeping tabs on.

He has merchandise.

And his "army" named him.

He is sort of mad it is a catchy name.

The sound of a dying animal warbles from his throat as he rubs his palms into his eyes. The more eyes on his actions, the worse the consequences will be if he is ever caught. He should lay low for a while. Let this unnecessary popularity die and actually listen to his father's pleas for now.

And stop flipping across buildings near shopping centers. Not his proudest moment.

Chapter End Notes

Hardcore All Might fans are menaces. But can he beat All Might though?

Why does Ground Zero have this following: It is basically because he is within reach. Everyone loves All Might because his is the immovable Symbol of Peace. However, we also know that not everyone is covered by his symbol. Ground Zero seems to reach the rest (in Musutafu at least).

Triggering a part of me that's always been indifferent

Chapter Notes

Last time, Masaru pleads with Katsuki to tone down the "training", and Katsuki has trouble doing just that. He gets a fun talk from his teachers, and the press+ infiltrate the school.

This is part one (out of three) of the USJ attack arc. This arc's song titles are from "I Am" by Jorja Smith.

UPDATED: Reworked. No major deviation from the plot. Comments dated before November 28, 2021, may not match the text.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katsuki did not expect to have a new field exercise a few days after the one he missed.

"For foundational heroics studies today, we'll study the trial of rescue. Whether it's a flood or any other natural disaster, every hero needs to be prepared to rescue civilians," Aizawa explains. "You can wear your hero costumes, but note, some of your costumes aren't adapted to the task at hand."

His warning does not stop every student from grabbing their numbered suitcase.

Katsuki grabs number seventeen and heads for the furthest locker room from the classroom. This is the first time he is wearing his hero uniform in this body. He pulls on the sleeveless black top with the large orange cross painted over his chest. The grey shoulder supports. The baggy black pants and green utility belt. The black and orange combat boots with the blunt-force-inducing silver kneecaps. The green and orange sweat-building gloves. He hangs his black eye mask around his neck.

He leaves his large grenade gauntlets in the suitcase. If it is a rescue mission, he will need full mobility of his arms. They are better equipped for large-scale battles, really, and he fights more close-ranged than long-ranged when he can help it. Plus, he still has the smaller grenades locked and loaded on his utility belt.

He observes his uniform in the mirror on the wall. The design is clunkier than his improved uniform in the future, but it gets the job done. And for a moment, he forgets that he is the body moving in the mirror.

He clicks his tongue and walks away. He can only stomach staring at his younger self for so long. He has gotten past the disappointment of how far his progress reverted. But the more familiar he becomes with this version of himself, the harder it is to recall what he should be.

He shoves his hands into his pants pockets as he walks towards the school bus. A couple of his classmates are boarding, and some are simply hanging outside of the bus.

Katsuki's lips quirk upwards against his will. *"Don't you dare,"* he thinks.

He looks to his right to avoid the fashion disasters in his line of sight and sees Midoriya chatting with Uraraka. An ugly snort burns his nose, and he smacks a hand over his mouth. He looks to his left.

Oh, no, it is *worse* on the left.

He is on a one-way train to Hell for laughing at these kids' costumes. But some may argue he is already there. Because he has the terminator on ice to his left and the rejected Five Nights at Freddy's animatronic to his right.

Katsuki speed-walks to the bus and picks the first two-seater he sees. He promptly buries his head between his knees. Who approved these hero costumes? He is not mad. He just wants to chat. He sucks in a deep breath to control the shake of his shoulders. He will develop breathing problems at this rate.

Jirou sits down next to him, scrolling through her music on her phone. Her eyes flicker in his direction, and she raises an eyebrow.

"Are you okay?"

Katsuki clears his throat.

"Peachy."

He flicks away the tears forming in his eyes, propping his elbow on the armrest and his chin in the palm of his hand. He hides his quivering mouth with his palm.

"Some of these costume choices are interesting. That's all," he says.

She snickers, trying to stop the smile tugging at her lips by biting them.

"Yeah, I guess this is the first time you're seeing them, huh?" she notes.

He nods and leans his boot on the railing in front of him. Jirou goes back to scrolling through her music. A comfortable silence settles between them.

The bus finally fills up and departs. He ignores the floating chatter among his classmates, staring out the window and watching the scenery blur past.

"If we're talking flashy and strong quirks, you *have* to mention Todoroki and Bakugou," Kirishima exclaims, belatedly grabbing Katsuki's attention from the window. Why are they mentioning his name? He is pretty sure they have not seen him in action yet—wait, no, they saw him use his quirk during the quirk appraisal tests Aizawa administered.

Asui shrugs. "Bakugou is too grouchy and intense, so he won't be a popular hero."

Jirou snickers next to him.

"Traitor," Katsuki whispers sharply at her, and she cackles into her covered mouth, turning her head away.

He turns to the rest of the class. "You don't know shit, Frogger," he retorts. He is plenty popular in the future, or he would not be in the top three. Though, it is probably because he works with Izuku

so much, and he is Japan's *sweetheart*. But these kids do not need to know that. On the other hand, he assumes the "Symbol of Victory" bullshit the press and the Genius Office push onto the public helps too.

But then, Kaminari opens his mouth with a shit-eating grin. "It's only been a brief while since our socialization has commenced, and yet already, we've been made apodictically cognizant of your personality, redolent as it is of a turd getting steamed in a sewer," he speaks every big word he knows into one uppity sentence with dramatic hand gestures.

Did this brat call his personality a steamed turd? That is all he could parse from that nonsense.

He can almost hear Camie, his personal hype man, instigating from his mind and whispering, *"Are you going to let them talk to you like that?"*

Shut up, nonexistent Camie. He is a fucking adult.

Unfortunately, it seems his mouth did not receive the same message as his brain. Channeling the energy of too many Saturday night drinking marathons of Camie's favorite vintage American show, Katsuki spews the speech she bet he could not memorize.

"I will not be badmouthed by some ineffectual, privileged, effete, soft-penised, debutante. You want to start a street fight with me bring it on, but you're going to be surprised by how ugly it gets," he says, pointing an accusing finger at the boy. "You don't even know my real name. I'm the fucking lizard king."

Kaminari gawks.

Heat licks at Katsuki's face as silence drags.

Was that too much?

Leave it to Camie to suck Katsuki into her whims when she is not even present. God, he wants to laugh, not at the absurdity of the televised rant, but at the loneliness and homesickness expanding in his chest.

She would be proudly… dying of secondhand embarrassment on the floor. Sort of like Jirou, who is trembling in her chair at the moment. "Oh my god, Bakugou."

The bus erupts into laughter.

"Dude, where's that even from?"

"Kacchan jokes?"

"What a vulgar conversation."

"But they make me laugh!"

"Bet you were waiting to use that one."

"Quiet down," Aizawa orders, shutting down the noisy chatter. "We're almost there."

·_·_·

All Might is late.

Aizawa and No. 13 whisper to each other before addressing the class.

“Welcome, students!” No. 13 exclaims. “I am Space Hero No. 13, and it is a pleasure to meet you all. We will utilize this practical training arena to stimulate all kinds of accidents and disasters.”

Katsuki, like his classmates, looks around the giant facility from the entrance. He whistles. Sometimes he forgets just how much money Yuuei makes.

Peering down the long staircase, Katsuki marvels at the several meticulously constructed areas, spanning out from a central water fountain viewing space. There is a large ocean with falling rocks, a severe whirlpool, and a giant waterfall. A mountain area with rickety rope bridges, jagged rocks, and hidden caves. A simulated avalanche tumbling down a snowy peak, complete with half submerged buildings and foliage. An entire city doused in flames. Another city suffering a severe landslide.

It keeps going.

“However, before we begin, I need to make a few things clear. As you know, my quirk, black hole, sucks any material into a vortex and turns it into dust.”

Midoriya, who is visibly vibrating along with Uraraka, suddenly speaks up. “Yes! And your quirk is perfect for removing wreckage and saving people injured by disasters!”

No. 13 nods. “Yes, it is. However, it is also a power that could easily kill others. And in that way, it is no different from the quirks of everyone here.”

Katsuki glances at his fellow classmates, noting their stiff and uneasy expressions at the mention of death. Their fidgeting and shifting bodies. He swallows, his face the perfect mask of disinterest.

He has killed before.

He remembers the events like filed away briefings in his mind, but he can clearly picture the aftermaths. How he stood in front of crying family members or widowed partners who yelled and beat their fists into his chest, unable to come to terms with reality. Watched as the last breath exited a prone villain he was unable to subdue. Carried a lifeless victim into the eyes of the public as their blood crawled down his tainted hands.

He wonders how his classmates, how these untouched heroes-in-training, would react if they knew. If they knew of the times he failed his duty. Of the times he could not save someone who needed him. Of the times he took a life for the greater good. Of the grey that bleeds into the judgement of heroes.

No. 13’s voice grounds him. “In this society of superhumans, quirks are strictly regulated, and their laws are strictly enforced. That being said, please don’t forget that each of you possess a quirk that can go awry. One wrong step is all it takes to kill another accidentally.”

“During Mr. Aizawa’s physical strength test, you learned of your respective power’s true potential. During All Might’s trial of battle, you took away a true sense of the danger of brandishing those powers against one another.” No. 13 claps her hands together, the bulky spacesuit creaking a bit, as she tries to brighten the mood. “*This* lesson will serve as a fresh start! Let’s study how to wield our

quirks for the sake of human life! I would like you to leave this exercise having fully understood that your quirks exist to help people."

With those last words, Katsuki can almost feel the relief seeping from the teenagers around him.

"I know that was a lot of information, but thank you for listening so intently and patiently," she finishes, bowing deeply.

Iida claps animatedly. "Of course! This was a valuable lesson indeed."

"All right," Aizawa starts, grabbing everyone's attention. "The first thing we will—"

A blob of black crackles from beyond the staircase and near the large water fountain below.

It swirls, dissipating near its ragged edges. It grows. Katsuki squints, his eyebrows knitting together at the almost mesmerizing whirl.

The cracked steel box reveals itself in his mind once again, looming ominously from the outer reaches of his thoughts. Its presence is an imposing pressure behind his eyes, threatening the blackness to move any further.

Suddenly, the black entity—almost like a mist—expands, seemingly hollow.

A pale hand grabs the edge of the mist. And as it grows even further, a face shielded by a detached, petrified hand and pale blue hair emerges.

Katsuki stops breathing.

He stops hearing. Aizawa's frantic voice mutes, and the static of a neglected television buzzes in his mind. Cold electricity thrums under his skin. His fingers—his toes—feel bloated as if creating a barrier to the outside world.

The cracked steel box snaps open, the latch on his memories shattering, and a flood of nightmares he left behind drown his consciousness.

"Kacchan!" Deku shouts, distraught. One of his eyes is swelled shut, the other wide and trained on his released form. Mr. Compress freed Katsuki from the confines of the marble only to be imprisoned again. Deku's arms are broken beyond repair and unable to reach out. It is too late. The darkness creeps around Katsuki's body as Dabi's hand grips the back of his neck, fingernails digging into his skin—

—The dust clears around the rubble and razed buildings. With a single fist in the air, All Might reigns victorious. But to save one boy, the world loses their Symbol of Peace. He points at the news camera, and with two words, he pushes the weight of the world onto another boy's shoulders. "You're next."—

—Rage swallows Deku's eyes as he yells a war cry, swinging punch after punch, lashing out black whip after whip at Shigaraki. Jade lightning haphazardly shoots from his body, daring any of the landbound heroes to get in between. But there is an opening. A noticeable hole in his assault. And at that moment, there are no thoughts in Katsuki's mind as he rushes towards Deku. And he pushes him out of the way. Dark tendrils zip from Shigaraki's fingertips and stab through his body—

—Katsuki kneels on the broken concrete, wordlessly watching the last threads of peace spill their blood onto the wreckage—

As quickly as the memories engulf every inch of Katsuki's body and mind, they shove back into the box, the fixed latch snapping shut. The multiple cracks on its surface remain.

He barely feels his eyelids close and open before his vision turns black.

·_·_·

Katsuki's eyes flutter as if trying to break the blur in front of his vision.

His mind is swirling in fading static as the surrounding noises grow. His skin feels almost too tight now as if trying to stretch itself as thin as possible. Everything is suddenly louder. Brighter. Present.

Sharp pain strikes from behind his eyes, and he scrunches them in retaliation. A wave of nausea fills the space the static left in his brain, and he digs his fingernails into the palms of his hands, riding out the waves.

Liquid burns his throat, and red spills over his lips, dribbling from his chin. He wheezes. His body shudders as he tries to breathe through the invading, stabbing pain and the blood bubbling in his throat. His ribs—something is wrong with his ribs. How is something wrong with his ribs? Adrenaline he did not notice numbing his body fades as pain crackles through Katsuki's torso. Every breath is difficult. Something must be punctured.

He sways in sync with a rush of dizziness, signaling he is standing upright. Katsuki's arms hang loosely in front of his hunched torso. Droplets of red splatter on something below him. Someone.

He looms over a dead noumu.

[~~"Don't fucking touch him!"~~]

The red slashes on his massive dark body look dull. His shrunken black pupils focus on nothing, eyes petrified wide. Blood and boiled bits of tissue pool around the exploded, exposed brain of the dead noumu.

Well, it is not the first time he came to his senses next to something dead.

"Shit, that's not fair, you cheater!" someone shouts. The person's voice is like a strike of cold water, a series of warning bells. Tomura Shigaraki.

But the bells ring too late. His body is already jittery. His pulse already threatened to jump out of his skin. The surprise of Shigaraki's appearance… Katsuki already experienced it—still experiences it as the aftereffects of his panic shake his body. Instead, he is left feeling bemused over the redundancy. Questions prod Katsuki's brain, but none of them manage to stick.

Shigaraki curses, whipping his head towards his not-dead noumu. "*Kurogiri*. Get the hell up already, and remove him!"

"A-as you wish, sir," Katsuki hears Kurogiri's strained voice behind him. The villain sounds injured. Katsuki barely manages to turn around before he is swallowed by a sea of darkness.

And then he is falling into an actual sea. No, it is the manmade sea in the practical training arena.

His body thrashes in the air as he falls against his will. There is no way he can swim. Every movement feels like daggers to his ribs. To his lungs. Every breath scorches and corrodes.

He plummets into the ocean. Salty water quickly invades his nose and mouth. He tries to swim, but his body is too heavy. His limbs are like concrete slabs, pulling him closer to the fake ocean floor.

A tongue wraps around his waist and pulls him to the surface.

He sucks in air against the protesting knives in his chest and pooling blood in his mouth as hands keep him afloat in the water.

“Are you okay, Bakugou?” Asui says, concern seeping through her words.

He is not sure if she expects an answer, but he does not give one, letting heavy breaths fall between them.

Her eyebrows furrow as she takes in his shivering figure heavily relying on her support. “Hold on, I’m getting you back to shore.”

“No—” he nearly hacks up a lung, “villains. Need to run—”

“All Might is here,” Asui cuts in. “All Might arrived, and the villains fled.”

~~***[Katsuki’s hands cover Noumu’s exposed brain, and he detonates his palms as fast as he can muster. Blood splatters his face—something crashes in the distance—as the exposed organ boils and bursts under the heat of his quirk.]***~~

The blurry vision sends lightning through his mind, and he grits his teeth.

All Might is here. Of course, he is; he was always supposed to be here. But the question prodding Katsuki’s mind persists: did All Might see him kill the noumu? With Asui helping him, his other classmates must be close by. Did they all witness Katsuki take a life, no matter how wretched and vacant it may be?

As Asui drags him to shore—she throws his arm around her shoulder and supports most of his weight—they watch All Might cradle Midoriya’s mangled body in his arms. They watch newly arriving teachers help an unconscious Aizawa onto a gurney while others round up scattered students and defeated villains. They watch the police converse with the school principal, Nedzu, as he sits on Vlad King’s shoulder. And Katsuki is hit with another set of prodding questions. The words never manage to reach his mouth.

All Might notices their stumbling trek towards the mass of people.

“Oh, thank you, young Asui, for saving young Bakugou!”

Katsuki glares at the ground until a gurney comes to pick up his pieces.

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Katsuki’s head slips in the palm of his hand, and he jolts, propping himself back up. He is not sure how much longer he can stay awake. Not after Recovery Girl healed his crushed ribcage. Not after his blackout during class. But they would not allow him to fall asleep no matter how many times Recovery Girl requested.

Blackout. That is the best way to refer to it, right? He cannot say he is surprised. It has happened before. And little by little, he would remember what happened. Bits would sneak up on him in the most mundane settings. Pieces would startle him during the worst of his battles.

Though, he has never tried to answer why he blacks out. They have not affected his work. Even when he is not in control, he can carry out his duty uninterrupted and unbothered, or so he slowly recalls. And maybe that is a blessing in disguise. To stand victorious in every state of mind, no matter what the job throws at him. And each returning memory reminds him just how much the job can throw.

So, maybe these blackouts are actually…

Katsuki's train of thought fades as the urge to slip unconscious presses against his eyelids. He sits cross-legged in a chair, surrounded by several teachers and staff, the school principal, and Detective Tsukauchi from the police in the principal's office. Everyone is blurry, but it makes the tense atmosphere more manageable.

All Might stands by the wooden desk, but Katsuki refuses to look at him. Nedzu is perched in his giant chair—or maybe the chair is normal, and he is just small?

Katsuki wearily glosses over the rest of the teachers and staff. Cementoss, Hound Dog, No. 13, and Present Mic are in attendance. He supposes Present Mic is standing in for Aizawa.

Katsuki closes his eyes.

Recovery Girl filled him in on his teacher's whereabouts when she treated him earlier. Aizawa is being transported to an emergency hospital because his injuries were so severe. According to the ramblings of one of his classmates during their treatment, Aizawa protected Katsuki from the noumu's attack.

"Bakugou," Nedzu starts, folding his paws together. "I do apologize for asking you to this impromptu meeting, but it is important we talk. You may not know, but I have been keeping tabs on you since we received your results from the entrance exam."

The lag between Nedzu's words and Katsuki's ability to process them causes his eyebrows to rise in belated disbelief. He slides his face into his hands.

Katsuki does not have the mental capacity left to process where this impending lecture will go. However, he knows he will be screwed by the end of it. Instead of evacuating like most of his classmates, he took justice into his own hands and ended up hovering over a dead noumu. He does not need the full story to surmise that much. He got his teacher hurt, and he probably indirectly caused Midoriya's broken legs. He will not be surprised if they expel him.

"Did you know that only one other student in Yuuei history received a perfect score on the written exam? What makes your case different from hers is that she has a quirk that enhances her mental abilities beyond that of the average human being. Quite similar to me, actually. You then proceeded to obtain the highest score on the practical test."

Nedzu stops to accept the steaming mug of tea Cementoss brings him, sipping lightly.

"So, a highly intelligent student with a powerful quirk and impeccable quirk control attends his first day of school with multiple severe injuries from a poorly explained personal training accident. He

then proceeds to incapacitate not one, but two incredibly powerful beings of chaos and destruction," Nedzu says. He pauses for another sip.

"Maybe you can help us understand, Bakugou."

He killed both the unnamed noumu and Kurogiri? No, Kurogiri was awake. How else would he have been flung into the sea? Katsuki sighs deeply. His head is too heavy in the palms of his hand to talk himself out of this one.

But why is he hiding everything again? Hiding his knowledge of noumus, of Shigaraki, of traitors and death, of the impending war to hit Japan? Of One-For-All and All-For-One?

Did he have a reason? He does not remember anymore; not with this muddled mind. He just hopes it is worth sticking to this time.

Recovery Girl places a hand on his shoulder. "This conversation would be more beneficial if held next week. After Bakugou has rested. This child, like the others, has just witnessed a traumatic event. He's also suffered severe damage to his ribcage, which punctured his lungs. Especially after my healing, he needs *rest*."

"It's fine," Katsuki says in a clipped voice, his eyes deeply hooded with each owlish blink. Every word is a bit slower than his normal, a bit slurred. "But I don't know what you want me to say. If I see an opportunity, I take it. So, I probably did that. I can't tell you if it was the best choice or the worst, but I can tell you none of my classmates or teachers would be alive if that villain were too. As for my previous injuries, I'm… fifteen? Fifteen. I make mistakes. And I'd like to go five minutes without that constant reminder."

Nedzu hums noncommittedly. "I'm aware you are imperfect, Bakugou. Though, I was hoping for more of an answer to quell my suspicions and help our friend, Detective Tsukauchi, out. But let's leave that discussion for another day. There is also the matter of your actions today and their impacts."

Hound Dog steps forward. "We collected multiple student testimonies as well as No. 13's testimony. Bakugou, you blatantly ignored your teachers' orders to evacuate and stay back. You also directly engaged multiple dangerous villains on your own."

All Might gingerly kneels in front of him, forcing Katsuki to face his favorite hero since childhood. He places a hand on his knee before speaking up, "Young Bakugou, your actions were courageous and admirable, and you protected your fellow classmates very well. But you are a hero-in-*training*. A student just starting out, not a pro hero. You should *not* have jumped into the fray like you did and put yourself in such danger. Do you truly realize the reality of what could have happened to you, my boy?"

With his limited knowledge, he cannot refute what they are saying because they may be right.

"If you're going to punish me, do it already," Katsuki answers, resigned.

"I'm sorry, kiddo," Present Mic apologizes, his eyes crinkling at the edges in pity.

·–·–·

Katsuki stares blankly at the orange and black controller in his hands, turning it over and taking in its unprompted appearance. He swears he had a controller just like this as a kid. Not to brag, but he was quite the gamer as a kid. xKingExplodoKills420x knew no defeat. Unfortunately, after his quirk manifested, he prioritized training over one-shotting pixelized enemies while his gaming console collected dust.

He looks around. A room of darkness surrounds him. The room is eerily quiet, except for the methodical drip of water in the background. As if it is trying to match the constant thud of a heart echoing off the walls. His heart. He would know its tune better than anyone.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Where the hell is he?

Katsuki tries to recall what he was doing earlier, but his thoughts are escaping him.

A white screen lights up his face. His eyes follow the black cord snaking from the controller to his old gaming console to a large, blank monitor.

"Hey!" someone shouts. A child, by the crack in their voice. "How'd you *get in here?"*

The child steps out of the darkness like walking through a waterfall. And Katsuki feels as if he were sent ten more years into the past.

Standing in front of him is… him. Kid Katsuki with his balled up fists and his favorite All Might-themed pajamas. The ones his father bought him for his fifth birthday with the blonde hairpieces sticking out from the hooded top.

Kid Katsuki puffs out his chest.

"You're not supposed to be in here," he says. His eyes cut to the controller in Katsuki's hands, and his face twists into something ugly. "That's mine! Give it back!"

He snatches the controller from Katsuki's hands and accusingly points it in his face. "Mine! Only I can use the controller. Me!"

Good god. Was he really like this as a kid? Katsuki pauses, taking in the overdramatic huffs and flared nostrils. Yes, he was just like this. He grimaces, raising his hands in surrender.

"All yours, brat," he says, pensively watching the kid plop onto the hard ground and mess with the gaming system's controls.

Is this one of those cases where someone is aware they are in a dream? Because he has to be dreaming. Katsuki touches his hands to his face and hair. He is still physically fifteen, it seems. How cruel.

"What're you doing?" Katsuki finally asks. If he is going to be stuck here, he might as well play along.

"Beating my score," Kid Katsuki replies, his eyes glued to the screen. He sets up his default settings to automatically turn on dualshock controller vibrations, sound, and picture.

"Care to expand on that, or am I supposed to know what you're playing?"

The kid rolls his eyes. "You are. New content dropped because of your hissy fit, so I got called in. Now, I'm trying to beat my high score."

Katsuki's eye twitches. If he were to smack this kid upside his head, technically, he would be smacking himself, right? And what the fuck does he mean by his *"hissy fit"? He is about to open his mouth when sound and noise fill the room like a surround sound audio system.*

"—No. 13! Protect the students." *That is Aizawa's voice.* "Don't move! Those are villains."

Katsuki blinks, and the screen changes to a still photo of the practical training area. USJ. Aizawa is pointing and yelling. Some of his classmates are confused. Some huddling together. Some covering their mouths. No. 13 is blurry as she tries to spin around.

Suddenly, the screen begins to move, hurrying to catch up to the sound.

"Mr. Aizawa, there's too many of them!" *Midoriya frantically warns on screen. The child bursts out laughing.*

"Dumb Deku being a scaredy cat's always funny," Kid Katsuki says.

"Don't be an ass," Katsuki reprimands immediately. He watches Aizawa pull his goggles over his eyes and unwrap his capture cloth from around his neck.

The child sticks out his tongue. "Of course, you sound like the old man. Always barking orders. Do this. Don't do that. It's my game, I'll play how I want."

"What? Dad doesn't curse. You should know that."

"I'm not talking about that *old man!"*

"Then who—"

"A hero always has more than one trick up their sleeves," *Aizawa says on screen before he jumps down the long staircase, hurling himself at the horde of villains forming by the water fountain below.*

Oh. He is playing the USJ attack like a videogame. Aizawa's iconic saying is one Katsuki remembers. Fucking weird dream.

An orange box pops up on the screen.

***[** New Quest Available! Stop Shigaraki to protect Class 1-A. Use the controller to move, fight, and speak. Special moves and attacks are now available. Additional future knowledge is now unlocked. Story Modes have been activated.*

*Do we accept this quest? Δ Yes × No**]***

The kid clicks the triangle button. He crosses his legs and rests his arms on his knees, hunching his shoulders. Katsuki controls the urge to tell the boy to not slouch like that. He refuses to sound just like Best Jeanist. On the screen, the camera moves in first-person mode, peering out through someone's eyes. It is him, based on the uniform covering the person's moving arms and legs.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

“Okay, ready,” Kid Katsuki mumbles more to himself. He opens Shouta Aizawa’s character information window, quickly skimming the information before closing it back. He turns his avatar around in a circle and observe the fast-paced scenes playing in front of him.

Black mist begins to form at the edge of the staircase, and he forces Katsuki to jump backwards, arms stretched out defensively in front of his classmates and second teacher.

“Oh, shit, is that who I think it is?” Katsuki says, leaning forward as well.

“Duh.”

Another box pops up on the screen. This one is light blue.

[** New Enemy Alert! The black mist is a B-rank villain called, “Kurogiri.” Kurogiri is a noumu created by Doctor Kyudai Garaki to serve and protect Tomura Shigaraki. His quirk is Warp Gate, which—**]

The kid clicks out of the box before Katsuki can finish reading it. He cuts his eye over to the kid, but the kid is too concentrated on the screen to care.

“Dear student! Please stand down,” *No. 13 says on the screen as she steps up next to Player Katsuki.*

“Bakugou, hurry up! We need to evacuate,” *Iida shouts, gesturing for others to start running.*

Black mist shoots out, crawling around Player Katsuki’s legs and heading towards the students as an ethereal figure rises. Kurogiri.

“Greetings. We are the Villain Alliance. I apologize for the presumption, but we took it upon ourselves to enter Yuuei in order to engage with Mr. All Might, the Symbol of Peace. We were wondering if we might be allowed the opportunity to extinguish him, you see,” *Kurogiri states. His voice is too polite, too professional, to match the depth of his threat.*

The kid clicks his tongue at the statement, gripping the controller harder. Watching him play something Katsuki lived is weird, but more importantly, it is fucking boring.

“Was Mr. All Might not meant to attend this juncture?” *Kurogiri sighs.* “No matter, my role is also to scatter you children.”

Katsuki hears the sound of the controller vibrating, and the kid clicks seemingly random buttons. The avatar jumps back immediately as mist begins to envelop his classmates.

“Ah, shoot! I thought I hit it faster this time,” Kid Katsuki complains. His fingers are a flurry of taps and swipes as he forces his player to change direction midair and dive off to the side. He rolls to his feet and darts forward. Toward the metal neck brace peeking out from behind the attack.

He clicks the circle and triangle buttons.

Player Katsuki front flips and slams his foot into the only tangible part of the villain. The neck brace crashes to the ground, black mist following closely behind. The avatar grabs it and explodes the metal in the palm of his hand.

Kurogiri groans, disoriented, as the black mist waves stiltedly around the neck brace. He turns the camera to look at this classmates. Some are missing, and so is No. 13—

Hold up.

"This isn't what happened," Katsuki blurts out. He did not know how to take down Kurogiri, let alone stop him himself. Not the first time around. He also had help. "I didn't do that. And where's —"

Immediately, the screen flips to white and then to an abandoned building. A dozen or so smalltime villains surround him and Kirishima, grinning and chuckling as if they have the upper hand.

"What? What're you doing?" the kid yells at him, flabbergasted.

"This… Yes, this is what happened," Katsuki says, nodding at the screen. "I don't know what you were doing."

"I was playing it right! You're messing it up! Stop!"

With his little hands, the kid pushes Katsuki over. He smacks into the hard ground.

"What the fuck?"

"Stop messing up my game," the kid shouts, hovering over him. He points at the screen. "That's the outdated version. I was playing the updated version. Now, I have to fix it. Thanks a lot, dickwad."

Dickwad?

Katsuki is too stunned to speak. From the interesting insult to the fact that his memory is apparently outdated, he begins to doubt his recollection. No, he is right. That was important. That fight with Kirishima was too important for their friendship to be imaginary. So, what the fuck is this brat playing?

As Kid Katsuki skips back to the previous screen, Katsuki studies it harder. In this version, Kirishima does not attack Kurogiri alongside him. In this version, less of his classmates get transported across the practical training area. Only eight students are missing: Jirou, Kaminari, Yaoyorozu, Hagakure, Todoroki, Asui, Mineta, and Midoriya. Of course, Midoriya is missing.

He stops Kurogiri. He stops him. Does he? Katsuki rubs his palms into his eyes, trying to remember. He knows he was transported into an abandoned building with Kirishima. He knows this. And yet, stopping Kurogiri does not feel entirely fake.

A light green box pops up on the screen.

***[** We have entered Story Mode.*

*Choose an option: Δ Dialogue 1 × Dialogue 2**]***

The kid clicks the triangle button, still grumbling about Katsuki messing with the screen. Katsuki is not even sure how he changed the screen.

Player Katsuki turns to his classmates, adding pressure to the neck brace in case Kurogiri tries anything.

"All of you, get the hell out of here. Call the teachers." *Hearing his own voice is jarring in the least, but the monotone nature of it is creepy. Katsuki sounds void of any emotion. The camera shifts specifically to Iida.* "Iida. You're the fastest. Go now. Do not engage these villains if you can help it."

The avatar stands, dragging the metal piece to the edge of the staircase.

"What? Bakugou, wait! Where are you going?" *Kirishima asks from somewhere off the screen.*

"The source."

"Then, I'm coming with you," *he declares, and heavy footsteps fill the room.*

Player Katsuki shoots out his hand in warning. "No. He's not someone you mess with. Do what I said, and get the teachers."

Kirishima does not budge. "I'm not letting you go down there by yourself!"

The camera turns fast and lands on Kirishima's concerned expression. And the avatar almost sounds angry. Almost.

"You don't get to make that choice."

Before Kirishima can open his mouth, Player Katsuki grips the metal piece in one hand and catapults himself into the air with his other, explosions wracking the air. The controller vibrates as Player Katsuki lurches upward, flying over Aizawa as he subdues the horde of villains.

He contorts himself, explosions accelerating the spin of his body until he is but a blurry tornado. Black mist fuses with the amassing cyclone, a menacing mixture of shadow and light. And it hurls into the concrete like an asteroid to Earth.

Howitzer Impact.

Kurogiri's scream cuts off as he smashes into the surface, concrete cracking severely under the force of the attack; dust and smoke billowing into the space around them. The mist huddles together, forming an intangible, motionless body around the damaged neck brace.

Player Katsuki pushes through the remnants of the explosion, stalking out like a demon from Hell. The camera is trained on Shigaraki's hunched figure. Fury fills the eye peeking between the petrified fingers that obscure his face.

"You hurt my getaway car," *Shigaraki whines, roughly scratching at the dry skin on his neck.* "You used cheats!"

"Fuck you! I don't cheat," the kid shouts, startling Katsuki. He forgot the kid was there. He was too absorbed by the screen.

"Aren't you five? You shouldn't curse," he says.

"I'm seven, chicken dick," the kid corrects. "You did."

"I'm grown. I can do as I please."

“Mom’ll scold you.”

“She can try.”

“She will.”

True. Katsuki relents.

A light green box pops up on the screen.

[** Choose an option: Δ Dialogue 1 (easy) × Dialogue 2 (hard)**]

The kid grins and clicks the X button.

“Bakugou!” *he hears Aizawa yell off screen.* “What are you doing? Get back!”

Instead, the camera moves towards Shigaraki.

Hands gesture around as the avatar slowly strolls towards Shigaraki. “You came to take out the Symbol of Peace, but you can’t even stop one kid.”

The words are playful, but the voice speaking them into existence is detached. Cold.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, brat.”

“Are you sure, Tomura Shigaraki?” *Player Katsuki asks. He stops in front of the young man.* “Send my regards to your teacher. He and I have some catching up to do.”

Katsuki slaps a hand to his mouth. It is jarring again. The words, the scene, they are wrong. This is not what happened over a decade ago. But these new words do not feel wrong. Here, he openly taunted Shigaraki. He spoke with him as if it were not the first time. When did he do this?

Shigaraki looks rigid. Confusion and anger swirl in his eye as he steps back cautiously. “How do you know my name? How the fuck do you know my teacher? Who are you?”

The avatar is quiet for a moment. Almost as if he were buffering.

“I’m just a guy looking to kill time.”

Shigaraki glares daggers at the camera, ire clear as day. “You will tell me what you’re hiding or die by my hand.”

The avatar drops into a defensive stance, his hands curling upward on the screen and his knees bending.

“I’d like to see you try, bitch.”

A light green box pops up on the screen.

***[** We have exited Story Mode.*

Experience gained!

Howitzer Impact +1

Player Rank +1

*Choose an option: Δ Fight Shigaraki × Reason with Shigaraki**]***

"What do you think?" the kid says suddenly. Is he asking Katsuki? Of course, he is. No one else is here.

Katsuki crosses his arms, an amused smirk on his face. How does All Might talk again? He clears his throat.

"Beat his ass, Young Bakugou."

The childish cackle makes him feel a little better about this weird ass dream. He cannot say he expected to watch himself play a videogame starring himself.

The kid clicks the triangle button.

"Oh, crap!" Kid Katsuki exclaims, shifting the left joystick and pressing a couple of buttons.

The avatar dodges to the side as Shigaraki reaches for his neck.

A warning message pops up on the screen.

[** New Enemy Alert! Tomura Shigaraki (or Tenko Shimura) is the one fated to fight Izuku Midoriya. His current quirk is Decay. This emitter type quirk allows him to destroy anything his hands touch —**]

Again, the kid clicks out of the message faster than Katsuki can read, but as the scene plays, he is not as put off.

Player Katsuki dodge rolls away from another deadly grab.

A foot slams into Katsuki's stomach, and he lurches back. The controller vibrates.

"I said, 'beat his ass,' right?"

"Shut up! No backseat driving."

Player Katsuki crouches from the ground, waiting as Shigaraki sprints towards him and reaches for his face. The kid clicks away on the controller.

The avatar slips out of the way and grabs Shigaraki's extended arm, promptly throwing him over his shoulder. Shigaraki smacks the ground on his back, his arm tightly secured in avatar's hands.

The kid clicks a button.

Player Katsuki scorches Shigaraki's arm.

"Fuck!" *The young man scrunches his eyes closed and kicks out violently, forcing the avatar to jump back.*

The villain glares at the screen, a grumble in his voice as he growls, "That was the last straw, you imp." *He staggers to his feet, cradling his sizzling arm.*

“Noumu! Kill him!”

The dripping water in the dark room suddenly sounds rushed. Accelerated.

Drip-drip. Drip-drip. Drip-drip.

A red message pops up on the screen.

[** New Enemy Alert! A noumu, also referred to as an artificial human, is a deceased individual whose body has been heavily modified by Doctor Kyudai Garaki—**]

The kid immediately clicks out of the message.

“Why’d you do that? It was red!”

“I already know what it says. Crazy dangerous! Run!”

Player Katsuki hightails it to the large staircase. But something massive invades his peripheral vision. Blood red slashes pepper the dark hand reaching for Katsuki. The noumu’s exposed brain pulses, shrunken black pupils zeroing in on him.

“Kacchan!—”

The screen goes white again. The kid screams.

But Katsuki does not notice. Because the desperation seeping from that call invades his body. Crawls up his spine and infects his mind.

“Kacchan!” Deku shouts, distraught. One of his eyes is swelled shut, the other wide and trained on his released form.

Mr. Compress freed Katsuki from the confines of the marble only to be imprisoned again.

Deku’s arms are broken beyond repair and unable to reach out. It is too late. The darkness creeps around Katsuki’s body as Dabi’s hand grips the back of his neck, fingernails digging into his skin.

His body lurches *back and forth as tiny hands shake the ever-loving fuck out him.*

“Wake up, wake up, wake up,” the kid says repeatedly.

“S-stop,” Katsuki stutters, barely holding onto his ability to speak.

“You’re doing it again!”

“Doing… what?”

“Throwing a hissy fit and messing up my game,” the kid states as if it is the most obvious fact. “Why’re you opening that again? The old man already put that back.”

“I was,” Katsuki starts to say and reaches his hand to touch the back of his neck. “I don’t know what I was doing.”

“I told you! You are messing up my game,” the kid repeats. “I’ll kick you out if you do it again.”

“You’ll kick me out of my own dream?”

The kid’s head twitches to the side, his eyes narrow a bit.

“What makes you think this is a dream?”

“What?”

“What?” the kid mimics rudely. “Are you dumb?”

“Watch your mouth,” Katsuki warns, but the threat has no teeth. Not with how lost he feels.

Kid Katsuki returns to the game, chewing on his bottom lip and mocking him under his breath.

Again, the screen rewinds from coarse fingernails and dragging darkness to modified humans and frantic calls.

“Kacchan! Behind you!”

Capture cloth wraps around Player Katsuki’s torso and yanks.

The camera lurches to the side, haphazardly spinning as the avatar rolls on the ground. His body halts, but the camera continues to swirl moments longer.

When the controller stops shaking, the kid moves the joystick for Player Katsuki to take in his surroundings. The camera darts around the area. Just where did the noumu go—

Katsuki’s breath catches.

The noumu hovers over Aizawa’s disfigured body. His arm snapped in half. His face smashed into the concrete. A broken ragdoll between the teeth of a vicious dog.

Recovery Girl said Aizawa had to be rushed to the emergency hospital. She said it was serious. Katsuki recalls being carried into her office on a gurney. Being healed by her quirk and quickly ushered into the principal’s office for questioning.

This… this is real. This game, these scenes, they happened. Katsuki looks down at his hands.

Is he dreaming? Or is he remembering?

Before the kid can even move his avatar, green zips across the screen.

“Stop it!” *Midoriya roars as he jumps from the ocean shore to the villain in the blink of an eye, his legs flailing useless and broken behind him. His fist winds back dangerously as emerald lightning dances along his arm.*

“Smash!”

He lands a resounding punch on the noumu’s chest.

It does not budge.

Shock absorption. This noumu has a shock absorption quirk that only All Might can overpower.

The dripping water beating into the ground of this room picks up again.

Drip-drip-drip. Drip-drip-drip. Drip-drip-drip.

Katsuki watches himself sprint towards the noumu, using his explosions to propel him faster. The villain stares vacantly at Midoriya's crippled body on the ground; its beak-like mouth slightly agape in an almost smile.

The noumu reaches for the boy.

"Don't fucking touch him!" *Katsuki can almost feel himself shout.*

Katsuki jumps on the noumu's back, legs tightly clutching its sides. The villain instantly changes its reach, snatching Katsuki's body and crushing his ribcage between heavy fingers.

Crunch.

But it does not rip him off. Not fast enough.

Katsuki's hands cover the noumu's exposed brain, and he detonates his palms as fast as he can muster.

Blood splatters his face—and something crashes in the distance—as the exposed organ boils and bursts under the heat of his quirk.

The noumu jolts once. Its body standing rigid for a mere moment. The hand squeezing Katsuki's torso slips away. The villain staggers—staggers over Aizawa's twisted body and Midoriya's wide eyes—before dropping to its knees. And then to its face.

In the dark room, Katsuki touches his ribs, expecting to feel the onslaught of pain. Instead, he feels numb.

"Who are you?" he asks the kid, staring at his hands.

"Seriously, are you dumb?"

"Just fucking answer the question."

"Take a good look at me!"

"I know who you look like! That's not what I'm asking," Katsuki shouts, ripping his eyes from his healed torso to the kid, only to find a faceless child staring back at him.

Katsuki jerks back as if he were stabbed. And when he looks back up, Katsuki watches rage swallow Deku's eyes as he yells a war cry, swinging punch after punch, lashing out black whip after whip at Shigaraki. Jade lightning haphazardly shoots from his body, daring any of the landbound heroes to get in between.

But there is an opening. A noticeable hole in his assault.

And at that moment, there are no thoughts in Katsuki's mind as he rushes towards Deku. And he pushes him out of the way.

Dark tendrils zip from Shigaraki's fingertips and stab through his body, *blending into his skin and drowning him in darkness. The light of the screen and the faceless kid are obscured from his field of view as the murk crawls.*

"I told you to stop opening that box."

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Katsuki pries his eyes open against their will, letting them clamp shut as a train of exhaustion wracks through his body. So, he *was* asleep. Of course. Faceless children do not exist. He was dreaming.

He presses a hand to his chest, feeling the rapid beats of his heart punch his sweaty hand.

The scenes he witnessed on that stupid screen felt real. They felt fresh like new memories being fed to him. The memories he is supposed to remember slowly. He has never *dreamed* them back all at once. That is not how these blackouts work. That is not how they used to work.

And of course, his younger self refused to give him any tangible answers as to what the hell was going on.

But it was a dream. Dreams do not require explanation. And he should not expect one.

Katsuki waits for his heart to calm before trying to fall asleep again. But the sunlight streaming through his window lets him know he failed.

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Katsuki's Events Notebook

1. *Sludge villain incident [added: Deku gets OFA]*
2. *Yuuei entrance exams [added: waste of time]*
3. *Graduated middle school*
4. *[added: Shigaraki attacks the class]*
5. *Did I win the Sports Festival my first year? [added: doesn't matter anymore]*
6. *Kidnapped by League of Extras [added: necessary]*
7. *The War for All ends [added: I need to destroy it]*
8. *Graduated high school*
9. *Future heroes fellowship in India and China*
10. *Returned to Japan*
11. ...

Chapter End Notes

Note A: One of my future!Kats headcanons is that Camie is Katsuki's #1 instigator. Thanks for coming to my TedTalk.

Note B: In this fic, Katsuki returns to 2020. The future would then be 2035. He attended Yuuei from 2021 to 2024. His university fellowship lasted from 2024 to 2028, and he returned to

Japan in 2028.

Note C: I don’t know if you can just explode Noumus’ brains, and they die, but I’m making it so. The shock absorption Noumu had in this case doesn’t extend to organs and typically internal body anatomy, just the exterior skin.

Note D: Katsuki has three main coping mechanisms. (1) Mild dissociation. We see this when he forgets he is standing in front of the Genius Office after being kicked out. (2) Severe dissociation. We see this during the sludge villain attack, where Katsuki enters a calm limbo to deal with the pain caused by the sludge villain taking over his body. (3) Blackout. A strong and defensive reaction to an extensive attack on Katsuki’s mental health.

Note E: The steel box in his mind is a visible/figurative representation of his ability to compartmentalize certain aspects of his life. We first see it during the sludge villain incident when that memory slips out accidentally. It is supposed to keep traumatic memories from affecting his work.

And of course, somebody's always gonna say something

Chapter Notes

> Last time, the villains attack Class 1-A at the practical training arena (or USJ), and Katsuki is blindsided by his strongest mental defense. He faces consequences for his actions.
>
> Thanks for reading everyone. Point of view changes ahead. Song title is from "I Am" by Jorja Smith.
>
> This is part two (out of three) of the USJ attack arc.
>
> I rewrote the last section of this chapter around May 13, 2021.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Tomura's POV** – Monday ._._.

Tomura slams his foot into the barstool as soon as he steps into the abandoned bar from Kurogiri's portal. What the fuck happened back there?

"We were completely defeated!" he shouts. "A bunch of kids and some no-name pro beat up our underlings! Even Noumu was done in!" He glares at the blank computer screen, something hot and ugly twisting in his chest.

"And the Symbol of Peace looked perfectly fine. You were totally wrong, Teacher."

The audio system crackles.

"No, I wasn't. I was simply optimistic," the screen says. *"And what of Noumu's body?"*

"I'm afraid the heroes and the police have commandeered his prone body. Although, the remains of his brain I doubt they can recover," Kurogiri reports.

"All Might killed Noumu?" the screen's robotic voice sounds almost incredulous.

Tomura clenches his hands into fists. He wishes All Might killed him, then this would be less of an embarrassment. "No, Teacher, it was this kid. 'Bakugou,' that no-name pro said. He killed it with one attack."

"Oh?" the screen replies. *"That is incredibly surprising."*

"He knew me, Teacher. He knew about both of us. 'Send my regards,' he fucking said. He even took down Kurogiri," Tomura says exasperatedly, recalling how that kid flipped him over and burned his arm. Embarrassed him like he was not even a threat. Looked at him with barely any emotion like he was *bored*. "It's all his fault it turned out like this. If only that damn kid wasn't there. If only I killed him when he was injured."

“There’s no use crying over it. Actually, this is in our favor, is it not?”

“Huh?”

“This boy, Bakugou, has knowledge of those who have operated in the shadows. Who attacked his school twice. Yet, we can continue business as usual,” the screen speculates. *“If he were truly good, then he would have notified the heroes by now of what he knows, possibly even before our attack. So, why the hesitation?”* The audio system crackles in the silence.

“This is not a threat, but an opportunity. And we should give this mystery boy a proper hello.”

“I want to kill him,” Tomura states. “But I’ll listen to your reasoning this time, Teacher.”

He crosses his arms as the screen chuckles.

“Good. Still, it’s disappointing Noumu was defeated so easily. And after the Doctor and my joint work was finally successful in charging him with power to rival All Might’s… Oh well. Can’t be helped.”

“That reminds me—power like All Might’s—there was one kid with speed comparable to All Might’s… He rushed into the fray like him too.”

“Oh, now, that is interesting,” the screen muses. *“Well, it is not as though today was entirely in vain. Let’s gather a new group, handpicked for efficiency. And this time, let’s take all the time we need. Then, we will have a chat with our mystery boy.”*

Tomura grumbles an okay, his mouth screwed in a tight frown. Trouble. Both of those brats are nothing but trouble, and he can tell.

“Remember, we cannot move freely, Tomura. That is why a symbol like you is necessary. Next time, you must show the world the true horror of your existence!”

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** – Tuesday ._._.

(Flashback: Year 2033)

Katsuki hears feet slam into the floor. He does not look up. This is what he gets for opening the windows in his private office.

“You do realize this is the fourth floor, right? We have a front door.”

Izuku does not respond. Katsuki stops typing on his Dynamight-themed keyboard. He hears him pace across the room, breathing too heavily. Too fast.

This is not an amicable visit to annoy him. He resumes typing.

“Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Katsuki has never minced his words, and Izuku does not want him to. He does not want pity or sympathy. Or someone who will sift through his mind at every waking moment. He wants a living

wall. To pry the gnawing anxieties and societal pressures from his ankles and throw them at something. A wall he can trust to not fall.

"How can they call me the Symbol of Hope if I rip their hope from their fingertips?"

He does not continue, but Katsuki can sense the hurt rumbling in his heaving chest. He glances up from his computer monitor.

If Izuku keeps pacing, he will pave a trench into his floor. He sighs.

"Expand and explain, Izuku. I can't read your mind."

"It was a hostage situation. A new villain threatening mass murder. He took a whole office building hostage," Izuku answers in clipped sentences. Katsuki can surmise the rest. He presses anyways.

"And?"

Izuku rounds on him with wild eyes. "And what, Kacchan? You're not an idiot. Why don't you read between the lines?" he snaps, slamming his hands onto the desk. Katsuki's computer monitor rattles, and he stills it. He removes his reading glasses. Just in case this talk turns into a fist fight.

Ladies and gentlemen, Japan's sweetheart.

"I said I was going to get them all out. I said they were going to be all right. And he kills a whole floor of people right before my eyes. I lied to them. Degraded their hope."

"And?"

"Katsuki, I'm going to punch you."

Katsuki finally stands up.

"And what do you want me to do about it? Boohoo, you're a such a fucking failure. Out of the thousands of people you protect every goddamn week, you slipped up once," he says, frustration growing in every word.

He grabs the man by his hair and yanks his head back. There is blood splattering his face and dust speckling his hair. His uniform is horribly damaged, and he probably needs medical attention. He must have come straight from the crime scene. Katsuki steels his face.

Be a wall.

"Cry all you want now. But visit their loved ones with your head raised. And be better next time. Japan believes in you for a reason."

Katsuki shoves away his unruly mop, and the Number One Hero stumbles back, silent. He returns to working on his computer. Izuku roughly rubs his glossy eyes. He pulls up a chair and hides his face between Katsuki's desk and his crossed arms.

"I know," Izuku says in a muffled voice.

He did not always go to Katsuki. He did not go to anyone. And for Izuku, keeping everything bottled up is not a good idea, so Katsuki drove him to see a therapist.

He broke the therapist.

So, now he sees Katsuki since he cannot not break. ~~Yes he can.~~ And that is a curse in disguise. Because Katsuki is not qualified to console anyone.

This is yet another way they are different despite being such a synchronized hero duo. Izuku externalizes his emotions. Katsuki internalizes them. One seeks out the other for comfort. The other pretends he does not need comfort.

No, Katsuki does not need it. ~~He needs it.~~ He has his own ways to cope with the job.

"Can we get drinks later? Or food? Or both?" Izuku asks in a small voice, peeking out from his arms.

He needs to convince Izuku to see a new therapist.

"Only if you sweep up the dirt you tracked in here."

·_·_·

Has Katsuki ever seen his mother breathe fire?

No, but he is sure she will in the near future.

"Suspended! How did you get *suspended*?" she screams at him, pacing on the living room carpet.

Bleary-eyed and hungry, he had just padded down the stairs for breakfast when his mother spotted him. Spotted him with her cellphone propped against her ear as she listened to a particular voicemail.

Now, he sits on the living room couch as his mother rages and his father fidgets.

"Mistuki, please calm down—"

"I will *not* calm down," she snaps at his father, before turning back to Katsuki. "You've spent *four fucking days* at this school!"

Katsuki snorts unintentionally. He clasps his hands together in his lap, lips firmly pressed together, as he stares at the carpet scrunched under his toes. He wills the beige fabric to keep him from laughing.

Not counting the weekend, he really got suspended four days into his freshman year at Yuuei. If only his younger self could see him now, he would have an aneurysm.

"Is this *funny* to you?"

"No," Katsuki replies, summoning all of his seriousness into one statement.

"Dear, I'm not condoning his behavior, but we haven't heard Katsuki's side of the story yet," Masaru reasons, placing a hand on his mother's tense shoulders.

Mitsuki crossed her arms tightly, narrowing her furious eyes at his seated figure. "Speak."

At least he can answer truthfully this time. Although he is not sure his dream is fact, he knows it is not fiction. Katsuki clears his throat.

“The reason I got suspended for two days is because, when villains attacked our class—”

“I’m sorry, what?” Mitsuki interrupts, her voice but a sharp whisper. He guesses the voicemail only listed the general details of suspension from Yuuei rather than the details of the attack.

“If you’d let me finish,” Katsuki snaps, huffing a bit. “I have a notice for you about it in my backpack. I forgot to give it to you yesterday.” He was so exhausted after the villain attack, Recovery Girl’s healing, and the impromptu interrogation yesterday, he came directly home and crashed on his bed. The last thing he wanted was his parents to pick him up from school again, so he took the train back himself. He is pretty impressed he managed to make it back.

Katsuki gets up from the couch and pads over to his discarded schoolbag in the foyer, grabbing the packet of papers from a folder. Mitsuki snatches the packet from his extended hands, eyes racing across each line of words.

“I actively engaged the villains, so they suspended me,” he finishes, a gross understatement of the event. “And barred me from participating in the upcoming Yuuei Sports Festival.”

From the gravity of the situation, Katsuki thought Nedzu was going to expel him.

He compartmentalized and minimized the War for All so much—slowly chipped away at the stress and trauma—all that remained was that the event merely occurred. Shigaraki’s appearance pried open his memories, and he blacked out.

He expected his recollections of the war and the events leading up to it to revisit him like a clingy, stale friend. However, he did not expect those memories to rapidly attack him. The onslaught of what may happen again disconnected him so far from reality, his mind dreamed up a kid version of himself to direct his body through it all.

However, no matter the situation in his mind or how brain-dead that noumu already was, he murdered him. In the eyes of the public, a *student* took a life to save a life—to save lives—and that is unacceptable.

Taking a life. It is narrow road few popular heroes walk. A poisoned road no teacher or professor warns you about, no mentor can prepare you for, until you are faced with your first covert mission that results in an extremist who would rather be dead than detained.

He wonders if it is his intense personality or the way he catches the eyes of certain villains like moths to a flame, but he is familiar with the dirty side of being a pro hero. The side that most popular heroes never see. The side that attracts specific underground operations or Hero Commission-mandated jobs that never feel right or wrong, just a puddle of ugly and muddled grey. The work shrouded in secrecy and kept away from the eyes of the public to keep said public safe.

Katsuki is no stranger to the public and private sides a pro hero can adopt. Work is work.

But when he saw All Might, the Symbol of Peace, happy for his safe return from being dropped in the Flood Zone, Katsuki only felt shame. He tried to jump off that fucking road. He tried to reject death and propose different ways to victory—victories he grew up watching on TV and had snatched from him by the realities of the field—only to end up on the same damn road while his

employers pat him on the back. Congratulating him because he reacts to something impossible by removing it from this Earth.

The USJ attack was not the first time he came to his senses next to something dead. However, it was the first time he came to his senses next to something he killed himself. Those moments used to be reserved for his clearest state of mind; the moments he has been backed into a wall with no way out.

But he digresses.

Instead of expulsion, Katsuki is suspended for two days, disqualified from the first year Sports Festival, and required to take a week's worth of Hero and Quirk Ethics classes as soon as he returns to school. Since the school is temporarily closed today, it is as if he is suspended for three days. At home. With his parents.

His father gasps, eyes searching for any injuries. "Katsuki! Why would you do that? You could've been hurt."

He *was* hurt. Katsuki could have been killed, but he is not about to correct his father. Not when he worked hard to convince Recovery Girl to let him leave the school grounds by himself.

He shrugs. "They attacked my classmates and teachers. I couldn't do nothing."

His mother finishes reading the notice, her mouth screwed in a deep scowl. Her eyes flicker to him, and she studies her son for a moment. The longer she stares, the more upset she seems. "And you won?"

"Mitsuki!"

"No," Katsuki answers immediately. But his mother's stare does not budge. She knows he is leaving out information, hiding details she would find overly concerning. He sighs. "Yes? It wasn't definite. People got hurt, and the villains got away."

"Winning is not what's important here!" his father exclaims, worry etched into his words.

His mother walks up to him, looking down at her son with an unreadable expression.

"Grounded. Two months. Give me your phone," she says. Mitsuki holds her hand out, and Katsuki gives her the device. "You'll get it back in three days."

Her gaze hardens further.

"And be better next time."

"*I know*." He knows that better than anyone. If he could do the whole thing over, he would still stop the villains. But this time, he would undisputedly win, and no teacher nor student would be injured.

"I'll come and get you when breakfast is ready," his mother says, her voice descending to a whisper. She nods her head towards the staircase, and Katsuki silently ascends to his bedroom, listening to the hushed voices of his parents bickering over him.

"We could have handled this better."

“What do you expect from me, Masaru?”

“I don’t expect anything, dear.” He pauses. “You hide behind a tough exterior when you’re scared. I just want to know what you’re really thinking.”

“I *think* he’s hiding information from us. I *think* he’s doing worse than he’s letting on, and it pisses me off. I *think* we almost lost him again. I *think* we should transfer him to a safer school. I’m thinking about a lot of things, Masaru. Are you happy now?”

·–·–·

It takes a couple of hours for his mother to bust open his door. Katsuki stares at her from his comfortable position on the bed, a different romance novel between his fingertips. He wonders if she took extra time to calm down. She quietly closes the door behind her.

“Listen. I—” Mitsuki starts, but twists her mouth shut, almost unsure of how to proceed. “I just want you to listen to me for a second.”

She strides purposefully over to his bed before nudging him with her knee, a voiceless order to move the hell over. As Mitsuki loosely clasps her hands together, they both sit in a moment of silence, leaning against Katsuki’s propped up pillows with shoulders brushing together.

“When did my dumb, hardheaded son become so hard to read?” she sighs and rests her head against his shoulder. A smirk finds its way on his lips.

“I get that hardheadedness from someone, and they aren’t Dad.”

“Shut up, you little shit,” she laughs, flicking his forehead. The conversation dies for another moment.

“We don’t really do this, do we?” his mother admits almost sheepishly. “This is up your father’s lane. We… I yell, and you yell back. Our little bouts of shouting, that’s our language, you know? Regardless of whether our words matched our hearts, we still understood each other.”

Katsuki hums noncommittedly. His mother is not wrong. The screaming matches that his father does not understand, the snide comments back and forth, the intensity of his mother’s demands of perfection and his perfect delivery—it is a dance they do. They did. A dangerous tango full of twists and turns. A dance built on a lack of straightforwardness to admit their true feelings. And they were okay with that.

“But, instead of looking in a mirror, I can’t see you at all anymore. Now when I yell, you pause first. Like you’re lost in your own world, and your father and I aren’t invited. We’ve lost our language.”

Katsuki rests his head atop of hers. “Maybe I can’t yell all the time anymore.”

“Okay,” she whispers. “That’s okay. I don’t mind discovering a new language with you, Katsuki. I… I just don’t want to lose my son.”

Something heavy pools in his chest at the quietness of her concern. He gently nudges her clasped hands apart, intertwining his hand with hers.

“Mom, I’m right here.”

“Are you really?”

He takes a deep breath. “I am right now.”

Katsuki closes his eyes and listens to his mother’s slow, even breaths. They stay like that for a while, almost scared to break the spell of comfortable silence.

Mitsuki sighs and gets up from the bed.

“Let’s go eat, you punk. I’m starving.”

._._. **Izuku’s POV** – Wednesday ._._.

Kacchan is different.

Izuku wants to laugh, and he presses his face into the yellow backpack perched in his lap to stop the urge. He does not think the other passengers on the train will appreciate such an outburst.

But it is funny. After everything that happened two days ago, his first thought—the one not related to scouring hero blogs or calming his mom for the seventh time after she read the notice on the villain attack or the social media buzz on the private Hero Commission meetings related to the increase in vigilantism—is of his childhood friend.

Monday was a whirlwind. Not just during the attack, but also afterwards. All Might personally took him to see Recovery Girl to heal his broken legs and fingers. Kacchan was brought in on a gurney not long after, looking quite disoriented and pale.

And Mr. Aizawa was quickly transported to a hospital.

What happened to his teacher was horrifying. Mr. Aizawa switched places with Kacchan, pulling him out of harm’s way, and the villain… it was horrifying. Tsuyu had covered Mineta’s mouth with her hand because the boy looked like he was going to scream at any moment and give away their hiding spot. Izuku never felt so helpless—no. Actually, barely a minute later, he had never felt so helpless.

When Izuku tried to punch that villain with One-For-All on 100%, and he did not budge.

He will never forget how the villain stared at him. With such vacant and dead eyes and an almost smile curling his beak-like mouth. How the villain reached for him. And he was too frozen, too hurt, to move—

He shakes his head. He is getting off topic. This self-discussion is about Kacchan’s change in demeanor. Not how terrified Izuku was. Nor is it about how Kacchan sounded when the villain reached for Izuku or how he exploded—this introspective analysis is about his change in demeanor *only*.

Kacchan is not inherently different. Kacchan is always Kacchan. But, at the same time, he is not acting how Izuku expects him to act. It is difficult to explain. It is as if the Kacchan he knew lived an entire life in one day and returned a changed person. A Kacchan, yes, but an evolved one.

The boy shakes his head.

Kacchan is not a Bokémon. He cannot *evolve*, Izuku.

Still, there are many key differences in the boy he once knew fairly well.

Kacchan gained a capacity for patience. Or at least a much higher tolerance for people than before. Instead of an explosion that catches everything in its wake, Kacchan is more contained. An explosion that violently attacks every surface of its container, but does not escape.

He cracks jokes now. Izuku does not know why, but this observation weirds him out the most. It is not like Kacchan does not laugh or anything; however, the things he found funny were pain and causing pain exclusively. He especially found Izuku's pain hilarious. So, witnessing him recite some American television show from heart in retaliation to an assault on his personality gave Izuku severe whiplash.

Kacchan is quieter. Now, the boy was never excessively loud unless knowingly around other people who boosted his ego or around people he wanted to mess with. Which is most of the time. But when the class was in awe of his ability to pitch that softball 725 meters, Kacchan did not bat an eyelash. Actually, he looked like his was hiding a lot of pain, which Izuku guesses he was if the way he passed out in the nurse's office later is any indication. Maybe that is not a good example.

Izuku wonders what could have caused such injury. He noticed the expertly wrapped bandage on his hand and wrist. He noticed the way Kacchan sometimes winced, his hand jerking towards his ribs before he stopped its route. He also rubbed his temples multiple times during class. Was it a training accident? Or did he encounter another villain? Izuku shakes his head. If it were an attack, the news would have publicized it. Well, actually, the news *was* publicizing a series of attacks—the Night Stalker Incidents—because a pro hero (The Builder) was taking credit for the actions of a vigilante ("Ground Zero," as coined by his fans) who brought the villain down. The last victim, Himari Takahashi, spoke out about it, and The Builder received harsh backlash from the public.

If Kacchan were caught in another villain attack, maybe it got swept under the wave of reporting and coverage of the Incidents? The boy is insanely stubborn. He never talks about the sludge villain attack, so why would he talk about a different attack?

Izuku clicks his teeth.

He is getting off topic. Again.

His fighting style changed. Kacchan's fighting style was always an all-out offense, using his quirk's propulsive abilities to close the distance between him and his opponents, followed by a bombardment of close-ranged attacks that often start with a powerful right hook. And, yes, he still uses elements of his original fighting style. However, Izuku sometimes saw the boy training before the school term started. Even his approach when fighting what looked like the ringleader yesterday, the small bit Izuku saw, he looks like he is incorporating more martial arts and gymnastics into his fighting style. Less explosive confrontation and more targeted and calculated attacks. At least when within melee range.

Kacchan does not care for his wellbeing as much as before. Izuku mentioned it in passing months ago, but he does not think Kacchan upholds the same standards of health as before. Again, this is unusual. Kacchan was adamant about perfect diets, perfect sleep schedules, perfect routines—because they led to perfect grades, perfect results. Izuku does not know about his eating habits, but he guesses Kacchan does not sleep much. He spaces out more. Sitting right behind him in class, Izuku can tell when he stops listening. His hand stops moving, and his body stills.

Scarily enough, Kacchan cares for Izuku's wellbeing and safety instead. It is subtle in everyday life, but apparent during crucial events. Villain attack aside, the boy celebrated his birthday, and he stopped pestering him.

Izuku frowns.

Well. Actually, although he seemingly cares for Izuku's wellbeing, he is quick to avoid the boy as well.

Hmm, maybe it is not outright avoidance. Maybe more like… indifference? For example, last week, Izuku displayed his quirk in front of the other boy for the first time during Mr. Aizawa's quirk appraisal tests. He chucked that softball 705.3 meters! And yet, Kacchan did not bat an eyelash. The boy he knew to be quirkless and went out of his way to remind said boy countless times suddenly appears with a quirk… and Kacchan is as indifferent as ever.

The Kacchan he knew would have grabbed the front of his shirt, shook him violently, and demanded answers.

Does he know about One-For-All somehow?

Izuku shakes his head.

How could he know? He never told a soul. There was no instance Izuku talked about One-For-All in the vicinity of the school or around anyone other than All Might. Well, unless he includes the conversation with Detective Tsukauchi when the man visited them in the nurse's office while Recovery Girl berated Izuku for being reckless again.

This Kacchan is unnerving. He is calculating, quieter, sarcastic, tolerant, a little self-sabotaging…

They need to talk.

Someone taps him on his shoulder. "Uh, are you okay, kid? You've been mumbling to yourself for the past 15 minutes," the man asks warily. Other passengers side-eye him discreetly.

Izuku shoots up from his seat, his face burning. "Sorry about that! I didn't mean to bother everyone —oh, this is my stop—have a good day!"

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Everyone is too early.

Izuku is the last student to enter the classroom. His eyes land on the empty chair in front of his. Oh. No, he is not the last student.

The air seems a little tense, too thick and too quiet. Over the past few days, his classmates started to open up to each other, and he liked walking through the door and being greeted with idle chatter. He got used to Uraraka and Iida's hearty hellos.

But now, no one wants to speak.

Someone steps up.

"So," Sero starts, breaking the tense silence of the classroom. "Monday was wild."

"*Wild* doesn't even describe it! We were attacked by villains!" Mineta nearly shouts, slapping his hands on the surface of his desk. "At school!"

"Yeah, my mom set up a meeting with Mr. Aizawa to talk about it more, but I'm pretty sure she just wants someone to yell at," Ojiro admits. "The notice they gave us for our parents was pretty dry on the details."

"Oh man, my dad too," Satou pipes up. "He grabbed the phone right after he finished reading it."

"Did everyone get scattered to other zones in the training area?" Yaoyorozu asks the class. "Jirou, Kaminari, and I were dropped in the Mountain Zone. We were surrounded by so many villains… there was no time to be scared or confused."

"It *was* scary though. But! We made a great team, right? Right?" Kaminari asks, his shoulders doing a little dance as he beams at Jirou and Yaoyorozu.

"Todoroki and I were in the Landslide Zone, and Todoroki was super strong!" Hagakure announces, her clothed arms waving animatedly in the air. "He froze all of the villains so fast—he was amazing!"

Before Izuku can open his mouth, someone beats him to the punch. "Midoriya, Mineta, and I fell into the Flood Zone," Tsuyu says. She looks Mineta dead in the face. "Some of us were more helpful than others."

"Hey!" Mineta cries. "The only reason those villains were all stuck together was because of *me*!"

The chatter dies down, and Yaoyorozu looks around. "And everyone else?"

"Well, Bakugou kind of stopped the rest of us from getting scattered," Kirishima explains vaguely. He looks a little uncomfortable, but admiration shines in his eyes. "I don't know how he figured it out, but he stopped the warp gate guy in the blink of an eye."

He did? Izuku only remembers the black mist-like substance engulf him, and then he was falling into the water. The next time he saw that specific villain—"Kurogiri," the ringleader called him—he was unconscious on the ground floor near the water fountain. Kacchan figured out to stop him?

Izuku shakes his head. Of course, he did.

"Hey, he didn't protect me. I jumped out the way," Sero adds with a cheeky smile.

Kirishima rolls his eyes good-naturedly, "Even so, it was like watching a pro hero at work… As soon as he subdued the villain, he immediately directed us to evacuate and get the teachers."

Iida grumbles, "I didn't like his tone, but he was right. I'm the fastest, so I left immediately."

Shouji's detached mouth speaks up, "I evacuated with Kouda, Satou, Ojiro, Ashido, and Aoyama. We tried to help Iida find as many teachers as possible."

Iida furrows his eyebrows, his mouth moving soundlessly. He whips his head towards the remaining students. "Wait, Uraraka… Kirishima, Sero, and Tokoyami, did you *stay*? Why would you do that? The teachers told us to evacuate!"

Kirishima bristles and stands up, his chair scraping loudly on the floor. “Bakugou went down there by himself! I wasn’t about to leave him too.”

Sero gestures between himself and Tokoyami. “We wanted to make sure none of the villains tried to leave the training arena and attack the rest of the school.”

Iida turns to the last student. “Uraraka?”

The girl picks at her fingernails in her lap. “I was worried. I couldn’t leave without knowing everyone was going to be okay.”

The classroom falls silent.

And no one wants to be the first to address the elephant in the room. The empty chair.

Yaoyorozu bravely steps up to the plate. “So, what happened? Is Bakugou okay? By the time Jirou, Kaminari, and I finished securing the villains and found our way back… wasn’t he being taken to Recovery Girl on a gurney?”

Some of the students look around, shrugging and trying to guess who may have information. Hagakure clears her throat. If an animated uniform could look sheepish, she pulls it off spectacularly.

“I eavesdropped on some of the teachers talking yesterday. It looks like Bakugou’s on a two-day suspension, got barred from the Sports Festival, and has to take some sort of extra lessons,” she relays, and Izuku wonders what else she may have overheard.

“Holy crap. He’s even out of the Sports Festival? What’d the guy do?” Kaminari inquires, incredulous.

The class falls silent again.

“Oh, come on, we’re dying to know what happened,” Ashido whines, sprawling out on her desk. “You’re acting like he killed a guy.”

Silence.

Ashido blinks owlishly for a moment. She jumps out of her seat. “Wait, no, no—did he actually kill a guy? No way!”

Iida stands up, waving his hands in front of his body, appalled. “I’m sorry, Bakugou *murdered* a villain, and he hasn’t been expelled? What is Yuuei doing? Why are the teachers being so lenient? Did No. 13 not warn us in the beginning of the lecture how dangerous any of our quirks could be to human life?”

“No, wait, guys. It—the situation is more complicated than that,” Kirishima tries to reason. His eyes flicker to Izuku for a split second. “Did any of you—not Sero, Tokoyami, Uraraka, or I—but anyone else actually *see* the villain? In action? He was like nothing I’d ever seen before. He moved like some mindless machine… And he was going to kill Mr. Aizawa… and Midoriya.”

Izuku swallows against a dry throat.

“Taking a life does not justify saving one. We don’t get to *play god* by being heroes,” Iida argues, his voice rising in frustration and shock.

“You didn’t see what happened, bro,” Sero speaks up, shaking his head. “I’m not saying *that* was the best answer, but… you just didn’t see what happened.”

“Then, explain the situation for the rest of us!”

“I only saw part of his actions, but Bakugou actually ran from the villain when the ringleader ordered the villain to kill him,” Tsuyu begins, her words turning the air stale with unease. “Noumu, I think he said. Before Noumu could grab him, Aizawa pulled Bakugou out of the way and was severely injured in the process. Midoriya tried to stop Noumu but failed, and then Bakugou killed Noumu before he could hurt Midoriya.”

Don’t fucking touch him! The words echo in Izuku’s mind. Clear. Raw.

“I, uh, I’m sorry. This is a lot to process,” Iida stumbles over his words, sitting back down in his seat.

Tokoyami stands up. “We’ve been at Yuuei for less than a week. I don’t know if any of us could’ve *moved* if we were chased by that villain—*Noumu*. He was faster than my eyes could follow. Stronger than our teachers… I… can’t justify Bakugou’s actions as right or wrong. I don’t think any of us can since we weren’t in his shoes.” His eyes flicker to Izuku.

The class falls silent again.

“A killer doesn’t make a good hero,” Ojiro says quietly.

Izuku’s head snaps in Ojiro’s direction, his eyes zeroed in and eyebrows furrowed in judgement. Too many emotions well up in his chest as the statement settles in the air.

They do not know just who they are talking about. They do not know how much Kacchan and he look up to All Might. How, when they were barely four years old, they always watched the stack of televisions displayed in a store window in awe as their favorite hero saved countless people without fault. How much the other boy dreams of having his own hero agency one day in the future.

They do not know how desperate he looked when Noumu reached for Izuku.

“I also attacked that person with all of my power,” he asks, a bite to his voice he never intended. “He had some sort of shock absorption quirk I didn’t know about… but if he didn’t have that quirk, would that make me a killer too?”

The class stares at him with wide eyes.

“What? Deku that’s… You didn’t… You’re *not* a killer!” Uraraka protests, trying to find the right words. “You’re one of the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

He smiles sheepishly at her as embarrassment dusts his cheeks. “Thank you, Uraraka. But, even so, how come I wasn’t punished too? I went out of my way to attack that villain. I gave away our hiding spot at the edge of the Flood Zone.” Midoriya stares at his open palm lying on his desk, stares at his bandaged fingers, clenching and unclenching his hand into a fist.

“I didn’t know what to do. That villain was monstrous, fast, strong… I saw Noumu standing over Mr. Aizawa, and all I could think was, ‘Stop hurting my teacher.’ I’m sure Kacchan was thinking the same; if he had time to think at all.”

Kirishima scratches the back of his head. “Yeah, I wanted to go help Bakugou too… but he stopped me. I planned to go anyways, but there was just so much going on—I couldn’t jump in at all,” he confesses, a small frown on his face. “But if I went down there too, would I also be suspended?”

Izuku nods fervently. He has so much to say. So much to get across to his confused and lashing out classmates. But what words would drive the biggest impact?

“When All Might visited me in the nurse’s office, Detective Tsukauchi followed because he had some questions about the attack,” Izuku says quietly but resolutely. “ ‘The students fought bravely and gave it their all. They experienced true battle at such a young age and survived. In such stressful and crucial moments, tell me, do you know any other high school freshmen who have faced such terror? Who have truly faced the perils of the world of adults? They showed those villains how idiotic they are. The students of 1-A will make fine heroes.’ That’s what he said. All Might had nothing but praise for us. *All* of us.”

Kacchan is not a villain. He is not a horrible hero. He is also just starting out like the rest of his classmates, so who are they to judge him so harshly? Judge someone willing to risk everything to protect the injured?

Izuku doubts anyone but All Might could have overpowered Noumu with only his fists.

Yaoyorozu stands up, straightening her back. “I think we all need to calm ourselves. We are classmates. Friends. We shouldn’t be fighting like—”

The classroom door slides open, and everyone watches as Mr. Aizawa trudges through the entrance.

The man is wrapped head to toe in bandages with barely enough space for his dry eyes to peer through. Both of his arms are wrapped in large casts. Every step to the podium is shaky, his shoulders hunched greatly.

“Morning,” he says simply.

“Teacher, you’re all right!” Iida exclaims, raising his hand high as he speaks.

“Er, can you really call *that* all right?” Uraraka questions behind him, a hand raised to her mouth.

Mr. Aizawa sighs deeply from the front of the class. “Don’t concern yourselves over me. After all, the battle hasn’t really ended for you yet.”

“Wait, there’s more? *Please* no more villains!” Mineta wails from behind Izuku, shrinking in his seat.

“Yuuei’s Sports Festival is approaching.”

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** ._._.

Katsuki thanks all higher powers that his parents, no matter how watchful they have been these past couple of days, still go to sleep fairly early.

He cannot take another family movie or game or whatever other bonding activity they want to do together. Taking time off from work to spend with their son cannot be good for business either.

Katsuki sighs. Okay, he is being too harsh. He did not mind destroying his parents in Monopoly. It was hilarious watching his mother flip the table after she landed on his Illinois Avenue property with a hotel ready for business.

However, all of the sitting around, even with the mountain of chores, was making him antsy. He needed to get out of the house.

His mind is also aggravating. The sheer exhaustion following the event finally dwindled to but a tickle in the back of his mind. The muddled barrier preventing most strenuous thoughts from sticking was finally tore down. And then his thoughts decided to fill in the available mental space.

He cannot stop considering coming clean to someone. Midoriya. Aizawa. *Someone*. He has knowledge of events that will happen in the near future. He may even have a potential mission if he plays his cards right. If he learned anything from being back in the past, he cannot do anything on his own. The most helpful resources would come from his agency, Genius. Since that is out of the question, the next best thing would be a teacher he is sure he can trust. He cannot speak to too many people—one person is already too many.

But would they believe him in the first place? Would he be able to communicate everything well enough for them to take him seriously? If he does talk to Midoriya, would this knowledge put a bigger burden on the boy's already heavy shoulders? Would Aizawa spread this information to a point where the future League of Villains would counter and change their plans?

Who can he trust?

He cannot fuck this up. This information is crucial to preventing or at least lessening the impacts of the war.

Katsuki shakes his head. He is getting dragged back to his doubts and worries. Focus.

This night has been fairly active with criminals. He already stopped a purse snatcher and a mugging. As much as he hoped that his little fanbase would lose interest after a few days of laying low, they have not. The stars in the young man's eyes after he stopped the mugger was a little too much.

"You're real! Oh no. That's not what I wanted to say—of course, you're *real*—ah, I'm messing this up so much! Just, thank you, Ground Zero!"

Look, hearing civilians thank him always makes the job worth it, but he is not acting as a pro hero right now. Katsuki is glad, relieved even, that he can help protect these people; however, he is still lying to them in a way. Operating illegally and above the law. So, every thank you is tinged with something that tastes just a bit awful.

He sighs and continues to peer out across the city from his perch on a rooftop.

"So, you're the vigilante everyone's talk—"

Fuck.

Katsuki immediately sprints in a random direction.

He jumps off the rooftop, dodging the sharp branches shooting at his torso, and uses the walls to slow his fall. He dashes into the crowded area, weaving through people with ease and exiting into an empty alleyway several blocks away. He scales the brick wall and climbs, dashing across the rooftops.

Once far enough away, he jumps off a roof and into another alleyway. He quickly pulls off the facemask and hoodie and clutches the balled up clothes in his hands. He ducks into a random public bathroom and hides.

Holy fuck.

Katsuki's heart hammers in his chest as he keeps as quiet as a mouse. That was Kamui Woods.

Katuski knows the pro heroes are out for his head because he read a news article on the Hero Commission's crackdown on vigilantism.

But he has yet to come face to face with a hero since he started. Was it dumb luck, or were they monitoring his activity? Scoping him out and finding the perfect moment to strike?

He can never be caught, or he will ruin his future. Far more than he already has or plans to do.

He waits hours before calmly exiting the bathroom as a regular civilian, hoodie tied around his waist and face mask shoved in his pocket.

What is more important? This smalltime vigilantism or becoming a pro hero?

._._. **Izuku's POV** – Thursday ._._.

Izuku is not going to get used to seeing his teacher so wrapped up in bandages.

"Instead of foundational heroics studies, we will be having a special lecture," Mr. Aizawa starts, garnering different levels of confusion and curiosity from the class.

"By now, I'm sure you have heard of the increase in vigilantism this past year, and how certain vigilantes have been gaining popularity in Musutafu. You may also have heard of the private meetings the Hero Public Safety Commission, or Hero Commission, has held the past several months. Today, I am supposed to hold a special lecture on the consequences of vigilantism."

His classmates begin to murmur, and Izuku glances around. He wonders if this lecture is directly related to the chase Kamui Woods gave Ground Zero last night.

Izuku does not know how he feels about vigilantism. Vigilantes are just unlicensed heroes, right? Moved by the need to protect, the need to save, right? If so, the very day All Might recognized him, the day he ran to save his childhood friend from the sludge villain—does that count as an act of vigilantism?

However, not all vigilantes are so purehearted. Some of them are ruthless. Mean. They will do anything to get the results they want, do anything to uphold their warped version of justice. Countless vigilantes are like this—Ratman, Pixie Queen, Supersonic—and pro heroes have brought several of them in to answer for their crimes. The crimes they swear are to *protect* the public.

Even the vigilantes that seem good, that uphold the same values as pro heroes, only do small acts of kindness. Almost like they are too afraid to step on the pro heroes' toes, but not afraid enough to don a disguise.

But then something major happened for vigilantism in Musutafu.

Ground Zero singlehandedly stopped the Night Stalker from taking his eleventh victim.

The Night Stalker was a serial killer that prayed on young women at night and hung them to death. Not a single pro hero could catch him, and the public was getting restless. And then, out of nowhere, The Builder—a smalltime pro hero from the countryside—claimed he took down the villain. His agency was praised for not only bringing this gruesome case to a close, but also paying for the last victim's, Himari Takahashi's, medical bills.

However, Ms. Takahashi took to Heroddit and explained what really happened that night. How Ground Zero, beaten and bloodied, stopped the Night Stalker from ending her life. How he apologized for being late and stayed with her until the police and medics arrived on the scene. How a vigilante acted more like a pro hero than a pro hero.

Izuku was not actively following the vigilante in the beginning of his career, just noting his acts here and there, but he will not forget the boom in his popularity after the news caught wind of The Builder's lie.

Not only is it amazing that a vigilante can have such an impact on the public, but he is a *quirkless* vigilante as well. Not one civilian saved by Ground Zero documented him using any type of quirk when he subdued their assailant.

Izuku knows this does not necessarily mean Ground Zero *is* quirkless, but the thought is inspiring. One of his favorite hero blog discussions questions the vigilante's "vigilante status" if he truly is quirkless.

All anyone really knows is the man is less than six feet tall, has red eyes, and is quite intense in person, but tries his best to be cordial to the civilians he saves. Some social media users mention he fights with a mix of martial arts and gymnastics—yipyip365 noted Ground Zero utilized judo on the man who tried to mug him, and pandamanda said she caught him flipping across buildings.

If an Izuku who had not had the chance to meet All Might—to receive One-For-All and begin his journey to be the Number One Hero—read about and possibly even met this vigilante instead… Izuku wonders if his dream of being a pro hero would be rekindled, or if he would try to take up vigilantism himself.

"Midoriya. Stop mumbling and pay attention," Mr. Aizawa reprimands, and Izuku shoots up straight in his seat.

"Sorry, sir!"

Though, it is unfortunate how much backlash the pro hero received from the act—inciting an internet war between Ground Zero fans and Kamui Woods fans, well, not like the Army stood a chance against the Woodpeckers—because Kamui is so cool! Izuku is sure the hero was only following the protocols set by the Hero Commission to crackdown on vigilante activity.

His teacher sighs.

“But you’re correct. This lecture is partially related to the attempts to subdue a certain vigilante last night,” Mr. Aizawa admits. He looks at each student in his class. “For homework, I want you to write a four-paragraph summary of Sections I to L of Title 6 of the Pro Hero Acts. These sections explain the detriments and consequences of vigilantism on society as well as the strict process of becoming a pro hero and the need for this process.”

The class groans.

“Quiet down,” his teacher warns. “This homework is mandatory; however, you are all smart individuals with your own opinions, so, instead of a fifty-minute lecture, I want to open up the class for discussion.”

Izuku perks up at that. A mandatory homework assignment. However, is it mandatory curriculum set by Yuuei or the Hero Commission? It is interesting that they are holding—or would be holding—this special lecture right after the Ground Zero chase. It is possible it was not planned that way; he knows a few other vigilantes have been detained these past several months.

“First, what is a vigilante?” Mr. Aizawa asks.

Yaoyorozu immediately raises her hand, and the teacher calls on her. “A vigilante is a person who voluntarily carries out duties usually done by pro heroes without regard of the hero and quirk restriction laws.”

Mr. Aizawa nods. “As you already know, I am an independent, underground hero. I’ve come across quite a few vigilantes over my career, and I’ve made my own judgements on how to handle them. You may also come across a vigilante as a licensed hero, and you will have to rely on your own judgement in the moment.” He pauses.

“Just know that a vigilante, first and foremost, hides their true self behind a mask and molds the law in their own image and morals. One major difference between a pro and a vigilante is that only one of them operates truthfully in eyes of the public, and therefore, is held accountable for their actions. A pro hero license may be the very thing keeping an inspired hero from becoming the very thing they swear to oppose.”

The class quiets for a moment, but Hagakure raises her hand as the first to break the ice. “I was watching a TúTube livestream of when Edgeshot caught Supersonic back in January. That was the first time I ever saw a vigilante, but this TúTuber caught the whole thing on video,” she explains. “I’ve never seen someone so angry and unhinged that wasn’t a villain.”

Tokoyami raises his hand. And only then does Izuku notice the small Ground Zero pin attached to his blazer.

“You don’t need to raise your hand to talk, just speak, but keep it civil,” Mr. Aizawa says.

“Well,” Tokoyami starts, clearing his throat. “That’s an unfair comparison. I don’t think all vigilantes are unhinged and angry. Some are just trying to help the civilians that go unnoticed by the pros.”

“Why not do that legally, then?” Aoyama counters, chin resting atop his entangled fingers.

“Maybe they don’t have the financial resources to do so? Being a hero can be expensive if you’re not popular or paid through civil service,” Uraraka offers.

“But laws are in place for a reason. If everyone could use their quirks for whatever they wanted, then society would threaten to crumble,” Iida says, his voice booming after Tokoyami and Uraraka’s softer responses.

Tokoyami’s hand jerks up until he remembers he does not need to raise it. He folds his hands together on the desk. For one of the quieter kids of the class, he sure is vocal today. “The law doesn’t always help everyone, but good people *do*. Just because someone isn’t a licensed pro doesn’t mean they can’t lend a helping hand.”

“Supersonic sure didn’t look like he was helping anyone,” Mineta mutters under his breath.

“Neither did The Builder,” Tokoyami fires back, his back a little straighter. “But society is supposed to depend on him.”

“Oh shit,” Kaminari whisper-laughs, hiding his smile behind his shaking hand.

Izuku glances at his teacher to step in, but he is not sure if Mr. Aizawa is awake or sleeping while standing up.

“Guys, let’s not devolve into idiotic quips,” Yaoyorozu reprimands. “Let’s get back to the point. Mr. Aizawa said, if we ever encountered a vigilante as a pro hero, we would have to rely on our own judgement in the situation. What would that *judgement* look like?”

“I mean, if they aren’t hurting anyone, why would we need to do anything?” Jirou asks, twiddling her thumbs a bit. “And in some cases, maybe they have information we would need to stop a villain. Like, maybe they have a better grasp of the situation, so… my initial judgement would be to work together unless proven otherwise.”

“What if they’re pretending to be nice, but are actually really twisted on the inside? How do you know they won’t stab you in the back the minute you let your guard down?” Tsuyu counters.

Everyone has been answering so quickly, Izuku could only listen. But he has some interesting thoughts on *this* subject! On how you can observe the facial expressions, body language, and other aspects of a person to determine their thoughts and objectives.

He raises his hand before he remembers he does not have to, excitedly bouncing in his seat.

“And with that, we are going to stop this discussion before it turns into a verbal essay. If you would like to continue, I can set up an open forum on the class portal. Let me know after class,” Mr. Aizawa says, cutting off all other opinions about the subject.

Izuku lowers his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I picked on Iida and Ojiro in this chapter, so I'm sorry Iida and Ojiro fans haha. Some notes are below:
Note A: Izuku has many friends in the future, and his best friends are still Ochako, Shouto, and Tenya. But he doesn't want to burden him with his darker fears and feelings. So, he bothers Katsuki.

Note B: Figuring out the BnHA timeline is torture. I made my own, more or less. School Term 1 started the second week of April on a Wednesday. The press attack was Friday of the second week. USJ happened on Monday of the third week. The school closes for a day (Tuesday). Bakugou is off suspension the Friday of the third week. Sports Festival occurs about two weeks later (early May).

Note C: Mitsuki's POV; something I want to do one day. I need to figure out how I'd write the inside of her head. She and Katsuki are sort of similar, but she's also a mother and raised that hellspawn.

If who I am offends you, don't feel sorry

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki gets suspended. He almost gets caught at night by Kamui Woods and has a crisis over his vigilante career. Meanwhile, Class 1-A discusses Katsuki's actions during the U.S.J. attack and the increase in vigilantism in Musutafu.

We pick up on Katsuki's second day of suspension, Thursday night. Back to Katsuki's POV only. Song title is from "I Am" by Jorja Smith.

This is part three (out of three) of the USJ attack arc.

Chapter ten will come with a long summary of the past nine chapters if you need it. Should get a chapter around June 4th (June 6th at the latest).

Lastly, thank you all for picking up this experiment. I never expected it to get this many hits.

Warning: mentions of drinking or underage drinking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Flashback: Year 2030)

It is a quiet night. Katsuki has not had a moment to breathe in four months with the bioterrorist on the loose and all. And, finally, they caught him before he could poison another water supply.

He relaxes on his couch, comfortably wrapped in a soft blanket, as he reads his new fantasy thriller.

His door bursts open.

Katsuki's sense of comfort is thrown off balance at the bang of his door against the wall. He whips his head in the direction of the noise, scrambling to find purchase on his couch.

Camie bounces in, decked out in her best clubbing outfit with her hair bouncing in loose curls. She throws her arms in the air.

"Girl, it's Friday night! We ain't kick it in a while on a Friday night!"

He sinks back into his couch and rolls his eyes, already used to her shit. He does not miss a beat, singing the next line in perfect English. "It's time to step out on this Friday night."

Camie smiles like she won the lottery, gesturing to his book. "You're acting like an old lady."

He snickers, closing his book. "Girl, you're probably right."

She squeals, hands making tiny claps, and jumps him on the couch. "Finally! This is the fifth time I broke into your place, and you're actually here. So, Levels, right? Because they kicked us out of

Studio One last time. Totally rude and uncalled for."

"You drunkenly challenged the owner to a wrestling match."

Camie leans back, looking scandalized. "And won?"

He still has not figured out when or how she copied his apartment key.

._._.

Katsuki licks the salt off his fingertips and knocks back another shot of tequila, sucking on the lime wedge quickly.

Songs that were popular fourteen years ago are scratched together by a DJ as drunk people sway on the dancefloor. The lights are dim, slowly flashing between blue and purple. And the bar is packed with bodies trying to order the Thirsty Thursday night specials.

He sits at the far edge of the bar, trying to ignore the music booming in his chest and the people happily chatting around him.

This is a funeral anyways.

He cracks a smile and takes another shot of tequila—Camie's favorite choice of alcohol that was not some fruity cocktail.

He is being dramatic. But it is a fitting sentiment. To drink to the friends he will not see again. To reminisce about the people he keeps pretending will tap him on the shoulder one day and put an end to this replaying nightmare.

Every time he thinks of Izuku like the man is going to pester him tomorrow with some absurdly wholesome letter from a kid fan.

Or Camie spiking the Genius coffee to make the day a little more bearable, and Jeanist calling both of them into his office even though Katsuki did not do shit.

Or Eijirou stopping by Genius to invite Katsuki to go mountain climbing, but really he is just checking on him and making sure he is okay.

Or calling Shouto in tears of laughter because yet another obsessed fan is pretending they are in a sordid relationship with the man, and the press is eating it up.

Every time he thinks of his friends like they are here with him. Not their kid versions that will never look at him the same way. Never be the people he needs now. The ones he conquered the world with who understand that, even if he tries so hard to hide it, he cares about them so much.

This is his funeral because he is dead to the friends he left behind. Dead because a certain villain—some mystery bastard whose identity no one knew of before the raid—ended his life with a punch.

This is his wake-up call. No one is looking for him, or if they are, no one can find him. He is not a pro hero anymore; no matter how much he pretends to be at night. He is not the powerful Symbol of Victory of the future. He is not surrounded by friends who constantly pester and annoying him.

He is just some brat.

And the sooner he accepts this, the easier the pill will be to swallow.

He should just focus on graduating at the top of his class. Again. Receiving his university fellowship. Again. Building his pro hero career from scratch. Again.

Katsuki finishes his shots and waves over one of the bartenders.

But he cannot really do that, can he?

Not with the memories of high school buzzing around his mind like a horde of gnats. The knowledge, albeit a bit limited, of events that should still occur no matter what he has done so far. A whole war.

How the fuck is he going to prevent a whole war?

Who the fuck can he trust to help him prevent a whole war, especially if he dies trying?

He is already on a timer. He needs to figure out who he should confide in, who will not jeopardize his knowledge, and what actions will best lessen the impacts of a crumbling country. And fast.

And he needs to talk to Midoriya.

But not tonight.

Katsuki rubs the palms of his hands into his eyes, rubbing away the worries in his mind. He pays the bartender for his next line of tequila shots.

He just wants one last night. A few more hours to pull himself together.

Someone taps his shoulder.

Katsuki glances back, coming face to face with two young women. They had obviously been here for a while with how worked up they looked, probably from dancing.

One of them holds out her hands to hug him, making grabby hands. “You are with us now. Come here, my sad child.”

“Uh,” Katsuki trails off unintelligently, raising an eyebrow at the girl and leaning away. He is here to drink until he is numb, and then go home.

“Ignore her. She gets weird when she’s drunk.”

“I’m not drunk!”

“Okay, sweetie,” the other girl humors her, patting the top of her head. She pauses as she turns her attention back to him, trying to find the right words as she makes slow gestures with her hands. “Look, we just happened to notice you sitting alone at the bar… in a packed club… in sweatpants and a t-shirt. And we wanted to know if you’d like to join us.”

“I can spot a depressed bitch three miles away.”

“Oh my *god*, shut up.”

“Make me,” the girl says in a mocking tone, sticking her tongue. She suddenly points at a random man hanging out with his friends, narrowing her eyes dangerously. “I’m going to make that guy buy me another vodka cranberry.”

“Don’t bother—and she’s gone.”

Katsuki snickers at her frustration. “Looks like a handful. I know the type.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes she’s worth it,” the girl says, a small smile on her face. She holds out her hand. “I’m Airi by the way. The walking tornado back there is Hibiki. I swear we’re not weird people.”

He snickers, lips quirked in a half smile. “Katsuki,” he says, firmly shaking her hand once.

“Seriously though, it’s no fun brooding at the bar. Why come to a club if you’re just going to sit and drink? There’s a million bars for that,” Airi asks. She crowds a little closer when a group of girls start pushing towards the bar.

Well, because he is physically underage, and bars have less of a chance of having cheap paper bracelets he can easily steal that tell an indifferent bartender the customer is of age. And Camie liked nightclubs.

He shrugs and says, “I’m happy to live vicariously through these people.”

Airi rolls her eyes and places her hands on her hips. “Okay, downer. You can also *be* one of those happy people. Just a thought.”

Before Katsuki can open his mouth, Hibiki appears behind them and jumps on Airi’s back, half a vodka cranberry sloshing in her cup. “Come *on* already! The music *speaks* to me. It tells me to dance. To the dancefloor, my trusty stead!”

Airi scrambles to secure her partner in crime on her back before turning to him. “So?”

He throws back the last of his shots and stands on wobbly legs. “Why the fuck not.”

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By the time Katsuki makes it back to his parents’ house after walking his new friends to their apartment, he has less than three hours to sleep off the rest of the alcohol sloshing in his stomach.

However, he would like to pat himself on the back for not only making his way home undetected by police, but also not waking up his parents after accidentally slamming the front door shut, bumping into the dining table after inhaling a couple of snacks in the kitchen, and tripping up the stairs.

He groans and falls onto his bed. He is out before his head hits the pillow.

·_·_·

He will never drink again.

Katsuki fixes his black sunglasses to better block out the treacherous bright lights and takes a sip of his large coffee.

How did he manage to get Airi and Hibiki to drink water throughout the rest of the night, but he forgot himself? The intensity of his cottonmouth tongue when his alarm clock tried to make his ears bleed this morning reminds him of why he stopped going out with Camie once he turned 27.

Better yet, how did he keep up with Hibiki's drinking? No one that small should be able to handle all of that alcohol. It is scientifically impossible.

A wave of nausea washes over his body, and Katsuki has to stop and lean against the wall in the first-year hallways until it passes. He downed a water bottle and a Pocari Sweat like a deprived man, took enough ibuprofen to numb a stab wound, ate his famous hangover soup—the fuck else does this body need?

Probably not the coffee that is sure to dehydrate him and mess up his quirk.

He takes another sip and steps through the classroom door.

More than a few heads snap in his direction, and all of the idle chatter ceases to exist.

He takes in his classmates' varying reactions to his presence. Ojiro's judgmental huff. Kirishima's nervous wave. Iida's piercing stare. Sero's entertained smile. Uraraka's shifty eyes. Asui's blank stare.

How fun.

Katsuki ignores every silent emotion seeping from his classmates as he walks to his seat. He plops his school bag onto his desk, clutching his coffee mug a little tighter. A vein pops in his forehead.

"Keep staring, and maybe I'll do a trick," he growls at the class, daring one of them to say something. Anything. Give him a reason to get suspended again.

An amused smirk tugs at his lips when multiple heads duck down or turn away. Mineta's squeak is especially satisfying.

Jirou gives him a weird look as he sits down.

"Welcome back, I guess," she greets, turning in his direction. "I'm going to take a stab in the dark, and say you had *quite* the night last night."

"I did have quite the night. Thanks for noticing."

Jirou rolls her eyes, shaking her head. "Will you make it through the *day*?"

"That is to be determined."

She hums noncommittedly. "Well, don't puke on me."

Katsuki stops pulling out his class notes to dramatically hold his stomach, a dainty hand to his forehead. "Now that you mention it, I'm suddenly feeling queasy."

She snickers, waving her mechanical pencil menacingly, "Don't you dare. I will retaliate in self-defense." And a tension in her shoulders seems to ease up a bit.

Not long after, Aizawa walks in. If you could call it walking. He more or less hobbles to the front of the class.

Katsuki's eyebrows shoot off his forehead, and he whispers, "Fuck, he looks like the walking dead." A stab of guilt fractures in his chest. Yeah, Katsuki, he looks he saved your ass from sudden death.

Jirou leans over a bit as Aizawa starts greeting the class. "You don't know the half of it. He came to class the day after the closing. He could barely stand."

"Seriously?"

The second Aizawa sees him, the man forgets what he is saying and interrupts himself.

"Bakugou, are you *hungover*? Are you serious right now?" Aizawa asks incredulously.

Katsuki tenses and takes a long drag from his coffee. He clears his throat. "I'm not hungover."

To be honest, he may still be drunk. Three hours is not a lot of time to sleep off the ungodly amount of tequila he consumed.

Aizawa stares at him for a second before releasing the longest sigh Katsuki has ever heard from the man.

"See me after class."

Katsuki's eye twitches.

"Wow, you *just* came back to school, and you're already getting in trouble," Jirou teases quietly.

"I'm just sitting here, existing," he whispers back.

"Maybe you're doing it wrong. Have you tried putting your existence on rice?"

"No, but I'll do that the next time I breathe wrong."

Aizawa has to tell them to be quiet when she cannot stop laughing.

·_·_·

Jirou shoots him a thumbs up before she leaves the class with Yaoyorozu.

Midoriya takes the longest to leave, loitering at the entrance of the classroom until Aizawa's cleared throat has him hightailing it.

Aizawa turns his full attention to Katsuki. "What's wrong with you?"

Katsuki makes a face. "Excuse you. Nothing's *wrong* with me," he replies, offended by the accusation.

Aizawa's stare is jarring.

"I'm signing you up for weekly lunch sessions with Hound Dog," his teacher states, leaving no room for debate.

Katsuki struggles with his words for a second, thrown off kilter by the sudden addition to his sentence. *Sessons* for what purpose? Why the hell does he need to see the guidance counselor?

“Are you shitting me?”

“Do you want to make it two times a week?” Aizawa threatens in an even tone.

Katsuki holds up his index finger, looking around and trying to find who the hell this man thinks he is talking to. He zeros in on his teacher. “What I do outside of school is none of your damn business.”

“Got it, two times a week. Would you like to make it three?”

Katsuki inhales fast through his nose, but clamps his mouth shut. His eyes are screaming.

Just be quiet, Katsuki. Quit fucking baiting him.

It is just—getting reprimanded again so quickly by pro heroes his age is painfully demeaning. The emotions bubbling in his throat threaten to detonate the room.

He smiles bitterly through gritted teeth. “I promise to be a model student moving forward.”

“Bakugou, this is not a punishment.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Katsuki mumbles under his breath before speaking up. “Can it at least be with Recovery Girl instead?”

“Recovery Girl is a great nurse, but she’s not—”

“I’ll feel more comfortable if it’s her,” he bargains.

At this point, he is convinced Aizawa gets frequent flyer points for every sigh. “I’ll see what I can do.”

His teacher reminds him about the hero and quirk ethics classes he must attend with Cementoss, starting today after school. The classes are meant to expand on topics he learned in elementary school when kids start exploring their quirks at a concerning amount.

Aizawa pauses for a moment.

“Look, Bakugou, if this,” he gestures to his sunglasses and coffee cup, “has anything to do with taking you out of the Sports Festival, I apologize. It was never my intention to do that. I recommended the ethics lessons only, and I offered the option for time away from school after what happened. Not mandatory suspension. I recommended the same for most of your classmates.” Aizawa closes his eyes for a moment.

“Although I wasn’t conscious, I know you didn’t make that decision lightly. Nor with a clear head. You shouldn’t have been down there in the first place, but, even so, you’re a 15-year-old boy who witnessed a villain not hesitate to kill anyone in his path. You panicked. We have your entire high school career to work on your reactions in high-stress situations.”

“Aizawa,” Katsuki trails off. “With all due respect, that villain wasn’t going to stop with Midoriya. The other guy, Shigaraki, wasn’t going to stop murdering every single kid in the area until All

Might showed up. And since I wasn't fast enough to stall that villain, I only had one option."

"No," Aizawa states.

"No? What do you mean, '*No*?'"

"You're still a hero-in-training, kid, so even though you may *think* you only had one option, there will always be another way. Heroes will always have more than one trick up their sleeves."

Katsuki stills at his words, shame pricking his skin and heating his face. His mind replays the shaky events of the attack as he searches for a different tactic. A new plan. A better way to handle the situation. *Anything*.

Maybe if he… no, caught and dead. But if he tried to… no, that is stupid. That noumu reached for Midoriya with nothing but massacre on his mind. Katsuki had one option. Only one. Right?

Maybe if he were in the right state of mind and not within a mental breakdown, he would have thought of something different.

Aizawa is right. Not once has he been sure of his actions since he came to the past. Nothing—not one action he took has gone his way, and every time, the wake of his decisions leaves him wondering just whether he is a pro hero at all.

He is nothing if he cannot do his job correctly. If he cannot save people perfectly.

A heavily bandaged hand lands on his shoulder. "We will work on this, Bakugou, you don't need to figure out everything right now. You're a very smart kid with a lot of untapped potential. We will overcome this."

·_·_·

The rest of his morning classes carry on slowly; however, the mundaneness of it all is relaxing. He can feel the stares from his classmates, but he refuses to address them anymore. He already took the damn sunglasses off. Leave him alone.

However, when lunch period rolls around, he is bombarded by bodies before he can rise from his chair.

Ashido, Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero attack and confine him to his desk.

"Dude. *Dude*!" Kaminari eloquently exclaims.

Ashido grabs one of his arms, and Sero grabs the other.

"What the hell? Let me go," Katsuki orders, roughly tugging at their tightening grip on his arms.

"Bakugou, come on! Let's have lunch together! You look like you could use some friends," Ashido says in a light voice as they drag him to the cafeteria against his will.

"I don't even have my—"

"I grabbed your lunch, bro!" Kirishima cuts him off, dangling his bento box in his hands.

He is stuck between Kaminari and Kirishima at a random empty table in the bustling cafeteria while Ashido and Sero step into the seats across from them.

“I know you got in trouble for it, but you were so manly during the villain attack. You were really looking out for everyone’s safety,” Kirishima starts.

“Dude, you were insane,” Sero adds, unwrapping his large sandwich. “How’d you do that exploding tornado attack? I can’t believe that Kurogiri guy got up after that.”

“Uh, practice?” Katsuki answers.

Ashido waves her hands dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, we get it already. You’re *amazing*,” she says, leaning in closer on her elbows. “What happened to you these past couple of days? You look horrible. Well, worse than normal.”

He blinks. Katsuki wants to be offended, but he cannot tell if she is deliberately being rude by the worry in her voice.

“I’m not dignifying that with a response,” he says and unwraps his bento box. If he has to sit here, he is eating quickly and quietly, then leaving.

“What, Bakugou, don’t be like that. We just want to know. We’re all friends here,” Kaminari reasons, nudging him in the shoulder. Katsuki nudges him back harder with an elbow to his side.

“Ow, you demon!”

“I spent my suspension reflecting on my actions. That’s it,” Katsuki says in between bites of food.

Sero stares directly into his eyes. “You don’t actually think we believe that, do you?”

Katsuki shrugs.

Kirishima puts a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe we can stop pestering Bakugou, and talk about something else?” he offers.

“But I’m curious,” Ashido whines.

“Do people with a stutter also stutter in their thoughts?” Kaminari suddenly asks.

Sero jumps up, pointing an accusing finger at the boy. “No, you lost your rights to ask dumb questions. We still haven’t recovered from the last one.”

Kaminari jumps up too. “You can’t silence me! I will find the truth!”

“We can ask Midoriya!” Ashido innocently proposes, and Katsuki chokes on his lunch. He truly cannot tell if she is being purposefully mean or ignorantly insightful. But if it is not on purpose, she is dangerous.

“Are you okay?” Kirishima asks as the table watches him regain the ability to breathe.

“I’m fine,” Katsuki wheezes. “And don’t ask him that. Besides, he doesn’t have a brain-to-mouth filter, so just eavesdrop on him mumbling, and you’ll get your answer.”

Kaminari salutes him. “Ay ay, captain!” he exclaims before turning to Sero. “You sit right next to him in class, message the group chat the next time he starts mumbling.”

“Oh! Bakugou, want to join our group chat?” Kirishima excitedly invites as he pulls out his phone.

“No.”

“Don’t be such a grouch. Grouches aren’t popular,” Ashido says.

“What’s your number?” Kirishima asks.

Katsuki makes a face and reluctantly adds his contact information to Kirishima’s phone. Immediately, his phone vibrates in his blazer’s pocket, and he is scared to look. He pulls it out.

school of rock *added you to* **We Survived** *including* ***fLEX tAPE***, ***electricSlide***, *and* ***Dancing Queen***

“It’s horrifying that I know who’s who.”

“We should come up with your username!” Kaminari adds.

“*No*. ‘Bakugou’ is fine.”

“What about—” Sero starts, but Katsuki cuts him off.

“No!”

Sero raises his eyebrows, amused. “I didn’t even say anything yet.”

“I don’t trust a word out of your mouth.” Katsuki points at all of them. “Any of your mouths.”

“Done,” Ashido cackles. His phone vibrates again.

Dancing Queen *changed* ***Katsuki Bakugou****’s username to* ***Roast Me Harder***

His childish classmates burst into laughter. He cannot do this. He needs to escape their clutches as soon as possible.

“I’m changing this, you immature shits,” Katsuki spits, opening the notification on his lock screen.

“Uh,” Midoriya interrupts unintentionally. Their table turns around to stare at him.

“Mido-Mido! What’s up?” Kaminari greets, a smile still on his face.

“Nothing! Just,” he turns to Katsuki. “Kacchan, can we talk?”

“Oo, trouble in paradise?” Kaminari teases in a sing-song voice.

“Shut up, Discount Pikachu,” Katsuki spits, and Kaminari loses all hope in humanity.

·_·_·

The walk to an empty classroom is uncomfortably silent. Midoriya does not look back, and Katsuki does not walk next to him, trailing after the boy with his hands shoved into his pockets.

As Katsuki shuts the door behind him, Midoriya's light pacing stops and he turns to face him.

Katsuki raises an eyebrow. He did not expect Midoriya to reach out first, or even at all. Katsuki actually wanted to confront the boy about One-For-All. To help him better use his quirk because, with the small instances Katsuki has seen, Midoriya has no control over it. And, for some reason, All Might's training is not helping.

Katsuki does not know how much time he has until he is face-to-face with Shigaraki again. He remembers he was kidnapped during the summer camp, but will that stay the same? Additionally, he does not know if the villain is going to try to kill him or recruit him, but he hopes his taunts will not lead him to the former. Because he has plans with the soon-to-be League of Villains.

So, speeding up Midoriya's mastery of One-For-All is high on his list.

But what does Midoriya have to say to him?

"Out with it already," Katsuki huffs, crossing his arms.

"Did you know that, when Tsuyu, Mineta, and I were transported to the Flood Zone during the attack… when we were surrounded by villains and barely cobbled together a plan to fight back… I couldn't help but think, 'What would Kacchan do?'" Midoriya admits. "No matter how unfriendly you are, your sheer amazingness at everything you do is so inspiring… How you always blast your way through every obstacle, always standing victorious in every battle. You inspire me to push myself pass my limits even more than All Might."

He stops talking for a moment, looking down at the classroom's tile floor and clenching his hands into fists.

"But now, I can't tell what you are thinking anymore, Kacchan. I don't know *what* you'd do."

Katsuki's eye twitches. One of Izuku's most annoying traits was how he could always read him. But as he assumed more responsibility, more duties and heroism, he did not have the time to dwell on Katsuki's state of mind. He had a whole country to look out for and protect.

Not that Katsuki wanted the man in his head.

"I'm not seeing the negatives here."

But his deflecting does not deter the boy. Midoriya stares at him with those calculating eyes, his eyebrows slightly furrowed in thought and his mouth screwed in a frown.

"Did something happen?" Midoriya asks. "Something that started back in middle school? And I'm not talking about the sludge villain incident. This is something else, something more. But… I can't figure it out."

Katsuki straightens his spine, taken aback. He really was not expecting this conversation. He shakes his head and holds up a hand.

"No, stop," he says. "First of all, I'm perfectly fine. Second, stay out of my head, you asswipe. Last time I checked, you don't have time to be mucking around on anyone but yourself."

"I'm not trying to get in your head. I'm just concerned—"

“Keep that concern to yourself,” Katsuki cuts him off, narrowing his eyes. He gestures widely to the room. “You’re at your dream school, *finally* making friends that don’t want to beat your ass, and you’re worrying about the one guy who *does*? And I thought you were smart.”

He steps up to Midoriya, looking down at the shorter boy. Putting distance between them with his words, but closing the distance with his actions. “Stop thinking about stupid shit, and enjoy your youth. Do whatever kids your age do these days.”

A weird smile curls on Midoriya’s lips as he tilts his head. “Kacchan, we’re the same age?”

“I *know* that,” he snaps a little too fast.

He watches Midoriya laugh nervously, something still on his mind.

“Just spit it out.”

“I’m trying!” Midoriya exclaims, wrangling his hands together. “I’m trying to—I need to ask just one more thing. I’ve been trying to wrack my brain around it, but I can’t figure out just why you’re acting the way you are. You’re just so indifferent about it! Did I say something unintentionally, or —”

“How do I know you got your quirk from All Might?” Katsuki interrupts, watching Midoriya’s mouth clamp shut, his eyes wide. He sighs. “Look, you’re shit at keeping secrets, but I’m the only one who’s noticed enough that it’ll be a problem. Let’s just say I’m very perceptive.”

“But how did you…”

“I won’t say anything, so stop worrying about it.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, Kacchan! You keep dodging my questions—”

“Because I don’t dignify stupid questions with an answer,” Katsuki snaps.

“They’re not stupid!” Midoriya yells, standing his ground. “I’m obviously asking the right ones, or you wouldn’t be dodging them! *How* do you know about this?”

Katsuki stares at the boy. He dug his own grave, so he might as well lie in it a bit. “Because I saw you two.”

“What?”

“Right after the sludge villain incident. I saw you two talking about how you wouldn’t have to give up your dream of being a hero. How All Might was going to give you a quirk,” he explains in an even voice, a humorless smile making its way onto his face. “I passed out in the bushes right next to you. And, yeah, I could’ve heard wrong, I was delirious, but then you showed up at Yuuei with this fancy new quirk. Just like All Might’s. It wasn’t hard to put two-and-two together.”

He stabs a finger into Midoriya’s chest, pushing the speechless boy back a step. “Well, now that that’s out in the open. The next time you have a meeting with All Might, tell me. I’m a part of this little club now. And your bone-breaking ass needs all the help it can get.”

“I—*oh no*, All Might,” Midoriya says, dread seeping from his voice as he tugs at his hair. “He told me not to tell or let anyone find out.”

“Technically, All Might said everything, so I think you’re in the clear. Maybe next time, don’t have an important conversation in the middle of a street.”

·_·_·

“I’ve got afterschool classes soon, so I’ll make this quick,” Katsuki says, leaning against the smooth concrete wall. The breeze is nice against his skin.

He stares at Iida and Uraraka in front of him. He is a little surprised they humored his call based on the looks he received this morning, but he will take it.

“You two are Midoriya’s friends, right?”

“I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t say it was about Midoriya,” Iida gripes at the same time Uraraka says, “Of course.”

Katsuki narrows his eyes at the walking car engine.

“Then, you better stay his fucking friends,” he continues. “The nerd has a tendency to care too much about people and try to rescue them from themselves. Don’t engage that side of him. Don’t put him on a pedestal or think he’ll solve your dumbass problems. He’s not your therapist.”

He pushes off the wall and walks up to them, his mouth screwed in a frown.

“If you’re going to be Midoriya’s friends, then *be his friends*.”

“Of course, Deku *is* our friend. We’d never treat him like that,” Uraraka says, a little offended. “Bakugou, where is this coming from?”

“Past experience,” he answers curtly before exhaling lightly. “Look, there’s a high possibility I’m not going to be at this school for long, so I need you both to look out for him. That boy’s got a hell of a future ahead of him, and he needs friends not responsibilities.”

Uraraka waves her hands in front of her shaking head. “Wait, slow down. What do you mean you won’t be at this school for long? Are you leaving or something?” she presses.

“Is the school rightfully punishing you for your crimes?” Iida adds, crossing his arms.

“That’s strike two. Don’t test me, Sonic,” Katsuki warns. “And it’s just a hunch. Worry less about me, and look after him. Midoriya’s never had a real friend in his life, so you two are fucking special.”

“But aren’t you his friend?” Uraraka asks. “You guys grew up together.”

“No, I’m not.”

“O-oh.”

“That’s all I wanted to say. You can go back to whatever you nerds do in your free time.”

Chapter End Notes

Katsuki, voice hoarse: Yeah, could I get a large Dunkaccino?
Barista, tired: Sir, this is a Starbucks.

Note A: Thanks, City Girls, for the featured lyrics between Katsuki and Camie.

You've been blind to the subject but not blind to me

Chapter Notes

Section 2 out of 4: Building Momentum

*When planning these past two weeks, I broke this fic up into four sections. Section 1 was "Adjusting to the Past" and included chapters 1 to 9. Section 2 is projected to include chapters 10 to 21.

Welcome back everyone. Song title is from "I Am" by Jorja Smith.

I should stop trying to fit a whole arc into one chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Summary** ._._.

Here's a detailed summary of the last nine chapters if you need it (too long for the summary box):

Katsuki is upended from his demanding pro hero life and sent fifteen years into the past by the powerful quirk of a drug kingpin's mysterious bodyguard. After a failed attempt to seek out help from Best Jeanist, his future mentor and boss, Katsuki thinks no one will believe his crazy story. So, he begrudgingly decides to relive the next fifteen years to return to his time, keeping his true age a secret.

Katsuki goes back to middle school, noting how nervous and timid Izuku used to be, how he bullied him, and why Midoriya ended up this way. He relives the sludge villain incident, dissociating severely when the villain tries to take over his body. However, it is all worth it to secretly watch All Might tell Midoriya that his dreams of being a pro hero are not dead.

People look at Katsuki differently after the sludge villain incident, and it irks him. While distracting himself with training and studying for the entrance exam, a disturbing nightmare disrupts Katsuki to his core. He drunkenly goes for a walk in the middle of the night and stumbles upon a man mugging an inebriated woman. He subdues the man and stays with the frightened woman until the police arrive. Katsuki decides to take up vigilantism to remember what it feels like to be a pro hero again, to be wrapped in duty and responsibility, and to shove aside his own problems and save people again.

During the ten months he has to prepare for the Yuuei entrance exams, Katsuki celebrates Izuku's birthday. Spending the day with the boy is awkward to say the least, but he leaves with a jarring conversation with Inko about Izuku's hardships growing up.

Katsuki enjoys his vigilante life—saving people like Chiaki the store owner and Haru the confused attempted robber—until he doesn't. A belated judgement call nearly costs Himari Takahashi, the final victim, her life when the Night Stalker nearly hangs her to death. Katsuki begins to question his ability as a pro hero while his vigilante persona gains popularity exponentially. He also attends

his first day of high school half-beaten to death from stopping the villain. He passes out in the nurse's office.

Masaru pleads with Katsuki to tone down the training, and they spend a school day resting and relaxing together. He returns to school only to have a very awkward meeting with Aizawa, Hound Dog, and Recovery Girl about his first-day injuries. The press invades the school somehow. Katsuki finally learns about the fanbase following his vigilante activities.

Class 1-A goes to the practical training arena (or U.S.J.) to study the trial of rescue with Aizawa, All Might, and Space Hero No. 13. However, All Might is late. Shigaraki attacks the arena. His presence triggers Katsuki's heavily regulated memories (and the negative emotions attached to them) on Shigaraki and the War for All. To keep himself afloat, he retreats into his mind and "blacks out". In reality, his mind's strongest defense built by years of trauma as a pro hero (and training to be) takes over. He engages Kurogiri, Shigaraki, and Noumu. Katsuki has the upper hand until Shigaraki orders Noumu to kill him, and Aizawa protects him from death. Katsuki kills Noumu to protect his classmates and fallen teacher. Instead of slowly recalling the events of the "blackout" in the days to come, Katsuki is slammed with recollection in one jarring "dream," starring his even-younger self.

For actively engaging the villains, Katsuki is suspended from school, disqualified from the first year Sports Festival, and required to take afterschool classes on hero and quirk ethics. Unable to understand her son past his need for victory, Mitsuki grounds Katsuki out of fear. After thinking through their relationship, she sits down with Katsuki and opens up to her son for the first time since he arrived in the past. Katsuki resumes his vigilante activities when he cannot handle lazing at his parent's house any longer. Kamui Woods tries to apprehend him, and he has a crisis over his vigilante career. Meanwhile, in school, Class 1-A discuss the villain attack. Midoriya overthinks about his childhood friend who has changed so much this past year, and he concludes that they need to talk. Aizawa holds a special lecture on vigilantism in Musutafu that turns into an open debate.

Katsuki sneaks into a nightclub to drink to the friends he will never have again. He manages to make some new, one-time friends and party all night. However, going to class hungover (potentially drunk) lands him another talk with Aizawa. Once Aizawa can sort everything out, he will attend "sessions" with Recovery Girl. Aizawa also causes Katsuki to doubt his experience as a pro hero when he tells him that killing Noumu was not the answer. By lunch time, Katsuki is whisked away by Ashido, Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero, and reluctantly obtains entry into their friend group. Midoriya confronts him about his actions lately, and Katsuki reveals he knows about One-For-All.

._._. **Shouta's POV** ._._.

Be a teacher, they say. Guide the next generation of heroes into the world, they say. No other profession will compare to the satisfaction of seeing your students prosper.

Bullshit.

He opts to give Nemuri the silent treatment every time he remembers how the woman talked him into teaching. Because if one of these kids pulls another stunt this week, he is going quit.

Why be vague about who?

If Bakugou or Midoriya pull another stunt, he will risk it all.

Izuku Midoriya. The flight risk with a tendency to jump straight into danger without a care of how broken he will emerge. Shouta was briefed on the events of the villain attack after he slipped out of consciousness. He was briefed on how the boy tried to take down Noumu by himself.

Midoriya does not have control over his quirk, yet he uses it as if the consequences are not destroying his chances of becoming a pro hero. Shouta told the boy to learn how to adjust his quirk during the first week of classes. If he can figure this out, he will be much more versatile.

Fortunately, he can breathe a little easier with Midoriya. All Might obviously took the boy under his wing well before the school year started. Shouta suspects it is because their quirks are so similar, though a deeper reason for this mentorship lies underneath. He just does not have the time to dig for the truth. He also suspects this is why the boy remains unpunished from the events of the villain attack.

Shouta sighs.

All Might needs to stop playing favorites with his students so transparently.

Now, do not get him wrong. Although Shouta thinks Midoriya should have been punished, he is also proud of his students' efforts. These teenagers were thrown into the world of the pros within their first week of classes, and they came out victorious. For example, Kaminari, Jirou, and Yaoyorozu were whisked away together to a terrain they had never been before. Forced to work together as a team in a situation where one wrong move could cost them their lives, they overcame the obstacles in front them in record time, melding their quirks into synchronized teamwork.

His students helped apprehend over seventy villains.

Real world experience is valuable in this field. The more experience a young hero in training has, the more it sets them apart from the others struggling to make it. They understand what is demanded of them faster than the rest.

But too much exposure too fast…

This leads his thoughts to Katsuki Bakugou. Just thinking the boy's name gives him a headache.

The self-sabotaging perfectionist who thinks he is better at hiding his emotions than he actually is. The kid who scored the highest on the Yuuei entrance exams and decided coming to class with a battered body was fine. The kid who took it upon himself to stop three dangerous villains to protect his classmates. The kid who can somehow assess a highly stressful situation with the rationality of a seasoned pro. The kid who turned to drinking because his actions had consequences, no matter how excessive.

Shouta has never seen someone so young so different from his environment. It was so unusual that he ran a background check on the boy and his family. He did so immediately after dealing with the press debacle the day he sat Bakugou down to talk about his injuries. No child growing up in a normal household acts like this.

And yet, Bakugou reigns an exception. His parents are fairly respected in the fashion industry. The family lives in a two-story house in a neighboring town with a low crime rate. No criminal backgrounds, not even a parking or speeding ticket to their names. Bakugou is a smart kid who was

at the top of his class in elementary school and middle school. He missed one day of classes in his life before entering Yuuei.

What the hell are they feeding this kid?

Is there something in the water?

Shouta wants to believe Bakugou when he says he is not being abused or not caught up in a dangerous situation, but the facts do not add up. And the more Bakugou stands out, the higher the chance the Hero Commission will take note and pluck him out of school. It will not be the first time they took one of Yuuei's gifted students.

He sits back in his office chair, peering at the stack of test papers on his desk that he has not finished grading. With his students on break this week for Golden Week, he has the time to catch up on grading while they prepare for the Sports Festival. If he moves slowly, he can at least write for a couple of hours a day. He carefully pulls Aoyama's test from the top, picking up his red pen with a bit of difficulty.

Bakugou made a difficult choice.

Shouta has an inkling the kid knew what he was doing. From the second he slammed Kurogiri into the concrete to the way he walked up to Shigaraki, he looked like he knew exactly what he was doing. And when whatever plan he had concocted in his head backfired, he reassessed his surroundings, reconsidered his options, and came to one conclusion.

The boy could not have known when All Might or another teacher would arrive on the scene. Whether it would be before or after Noumu got to Midoriya. Murdered Bakugou, Shouta, and his two students hiding at the shore. He witnessed the speed and power of a villain he could not match in a head-on battle. He would like to think his student considered every option to distract, stall, and stun.

But Bakugou also watched his teacher get *crushed*. Noumu destroyed Shouta's body. His arms were riddled with comminuted fractures, his face with facial fractures, where the bones around his eye sockets were crushed into a powder. His eyesight took a small hit that day.

So, Bakugou made a choice no child should be able to do. He used Noumu's distracted state against him. He outsmarted and killed him before the villain could take a life. Each step seemed calculated; each step pre-programmed.

In his first real heroics lesson at Yuuei, Bakugou showed his classmates the bleak choice a pro hero may make out of necessity. How a single judgement call, weighing lives against each other, taints his hands in blood he can never wash away. Because there is no way he is walking away from this decision unscathed. And yet he acts like he shoulders decisions like these all the time.

Bakugou *told* him he had one option, and he stuck by his decision, a look of finality in his eyes as he spoke.

This kid with no prior experience in the field decided, right then and there, killing was the only option. This kid, whose *only* prior experience with a villain is the one who tried to kill *him* in middle school, decided killing was the only option.

And that unnerves Shouta.

He needs to disrupt this train of thought before it is too late.

Bakugou needs to understand the weight of his actions. To make sure his potential does not go to waste, and to make sure he never turns into something he will hate. This boy needs to always think of the better solution. The one that he can be proud of at the end of the day.

And Shouta needs to talk to Chiyo. He told Bakugou he will attend guidance sessions twice a week. However, the nurse was running around last week because of the third-year heroics students, and he did not have the chance to flag her down. He will pull her aside after the Sports Festival.

The kid requested her over Ryou, so he hopes she can get through to him. Have him open up to a person instead of a beer can. Because there is no way he is all right.

The only problem is Chiyo is a *physical* healer. She takes her patients very seriously, but this is not a case she can kiss away.

._._. **Katsuki's POV** ._._.

"Move *faster*!" Katsuki yells to no one.

He stretches his body to his limits and beyond, reaching further, stepping faster, pushing harder. He sprints across the rooftop, jumping at the peak of his momentum onto the rooftop in front of him. He rolls and immediately continues running. Running because their lives depend on him moving faster.

If he cannot catch up to the black van before it hits that red light—before the stoplight turns green, and it speeds onto the highway—he will fail them. He has one chance.

After the run-in with Kamui Woods, Katsuki completely changed his night patrol route to throw off any pro heroes who may be looking for him. He began to stick to the shadows far more than before.

And on this new route, he witnessed a young man with prominent koala bear features get shoved into a van; his wrists bound, and his mouth gagged.

He was not alone in the van.

But the five kidnappers had illegal support items. Katsuki was distracted taking down the four kidnappers guarding the van, and the driver got away. He just found the damn thing again, and he is *not* letting it go.

The stoplight flickers to green.

Katsuki curses loudly and pushes the rest of his energy into his run. The van starts to shift forward as he risks a two-story jump off of the edge of a building. He crashes onto the top of the van. Something in his left ankle snaps under the force of the fall as he rolls through it, hands and knees smacking onto the metal. He steadies himself.

The pain carves through his ankle like a jagged knife, every slice of the blade swelling the area. He grits his teeth and tries to push the pain from his mind. This is not the time.

Gripping the edge of the van top on the passenger side, he pushes off his feet, swooping down and smashing through the window. He unintentionally kicks the driver in the neck. The kidnapper chokes and slams into the side of the van, swerving the vehicle dangerously. Cars surrounding them swerve too, honking and nearly crashing into each other.

“Fuck you,” the guy tries to say, but his words are garbled and strained. He grabs Katsuki’s injured ankle, and out of reflex, Katsuki smashes his right knee into the man’s nose.

The man slumps in the driver’s seat, blood gushing from his crooked nose. But his foot accelerates the gas as the van veers without anyone steering. Katsuki scrambles for the wheel, shoving the guy’s foot off the gas and stomping his own foot on the breaks.

The van crashes into a telephone pole.

The air bags automatically burst, squeeze Katsuki against the unconscious kidnapper and the car seat. He feels for the driver’s seat door handle and opens it, pulling himself out and falling onto the ground. He makes sure the man is unconscious before pulling him out of the van and tying him up with the man’s belt. Katsuki quickly limps to the back of the van.

Cars circle around the crash, confused and frustrated people exit their vehicles and start swearing, only to lose their voices at the sight of the vigilante and the slightly smoking van.

Katsuki swings the back doors open. Five people with hands bound and mouths gagged, their limbs tangled together after the crash, but thankfully unhurt.

One young man, three young women, and one little boy stare at him. All of them have various mutation quirks that gave them animalistic features. None of them look related. This is possibly five different kidnapping events with the same van.

“You’re all safe now,” Katsuki says, gesturing for everyone to exit the van. “Sorry for the bumpy ride.”

He helps the four adults out of the van one by one, removing their bindings.

Katsuki’s eyes flit to the little fox boy. He cannot be older than five or six years. Tears stream down the boy’s face and wet his fur as he breathes heavily around his gag. His fox ears jolt at every little noise, and his eyes dart around, wide. He stays pressed against the wall dividing the back and the front of the van.

Katsuki carefully holds his hands up.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he tries for a gentle tone. The boy stills immediately, eyes glued to him in terror. He thinks about how his father used to talk to him after a particularly nasty nightmare when he was a kid. Katsuki attempts to mirror his father’s soft expression, though the face mask is not doing him any favors. “It’s okay now. This bad dream is over, and those men are never going to hurt you again.”

He holds out his hand. “It’s okay now. I promise.”

The little boy hesitates for a second, a hesitation that will stick with him for the rest of his life, but he slowly crawls to his feet. And he jumps into Katsuki’s arms as the loudest cry rips from his quivering lips and threatens to break Katsuki’s heart.

“It’s going to be okay; you’re going to be okay,” Katsuki whispers to the boy like a mantra, propping him up on his hip. “You were very brave. Your parents are going to be so amazed by how strong you are.”

The boy has an iron grip on his hoodie, hands balled in the soft material, but Katsuki manages to get the cloth gag and wrist bindings off of him before addressing the amassing crowd of people.

People with recording cellphones.

He needs to get out here. *Now*.

Katsuki clears his throat.

“Has someone called the police?” he yells at the crowd.

“I did, Ground Zero, sir!” a random person shouts back. Great. *Time to go*.

Katsuki turns to the koala bear man still lingering by the van.

“Could you relay to the police that four unconscious villains are in the alleyway of fifth street and first avenue? That’s the rest of them.”

The man nods fervently, still spooked by the way his hands have not stopped shaking. Police sirens wail in the distance. Katsuki looks at the little boy in his hands.

“Kid,” he starts in a soft voice. “I have to go now, but the police are on their way. They’re going to get you back to your parents, all right?”

The boy frantically shakes his head and burrows into Katsuki’s hoodie even more.

“No! Don’t go! Please don’t go,” he begs in a cracked voice.

“Hey,” Katsuki says, pulling out a gentleness from his voice he did not think he had. He sets the boy on the ground in front of him and kneels down. Small hands latch onto his hoodie once again. “I want to stay here with you, but if I do, then who’s going to help the next kid?”

Katsuki wipes the tears from the boy’s blotchy face with his thumb. The sounds of the police sirens are much closer.

“You were so brave, I’m super impressed, kid. I know you can do this too. And you won’t be alone. You’ve got all of these people out here watching over you,” Katsuki says, gesturing to the dozens of people crowding the area. The other victims huddling together and comforting each other. “So, do you think you can wait here just until the police come? Please?”

The boy is silent for a moment, staring into Katsuki’s eyes before he gives one nod. His ears lower pitifully.

“Okay,” he replies in a quiet voice.

A feeling of hopelessness fills Katsuki’s heart. He wants to stay here with this child. To personally make sure his parents find him again and wrap him in a blanket of hugs and kisses. But he cannot. He bites the inside of his lip and ruffles the top of the kid’s head, watching his ears perking up slightly.

“Thank you.”

Katsuki looks at the koala bear man one last time.

“Stay with him until he’s back with his parents. Please.”

“Yes, of course,” he replies instantly, joining the boy and holding out his hand.

The kid hugs him one last time as police cars pull up and several officers pour of the vehicles. Katsuki pulls away from him, but one step on his foot sends throbbing pain through his bloated ankle. He bites down harder on the inside of his lip, drawing blood, as he falls back on his knee.

“Hey!” a police officer shouts. “That’s Ground Zero!”

Katsuki springs back up and run-limps through the excruciating pulses wracking his foot, weaving through the crowd before the officers can grab him. He disappears from the scene.

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Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/groundzerosnumberonefan · 1d

[**GZ**] BREAKING NEWS BY MUSUTAFU TRIBUNE!

“Ground Zero stops human trafficking in transit, sparks police investigation”

—by Rei Nakamura

[URL LINK]

...Hey, Army! Just sharing the news article on Ground Zero’s actions last night. Anyone else super excited? Isn’t this the first time we have CLEAR PICTURES of our vigilante and not those extra blurry drunk ones? Apparently, Nakamura’s partner was at the scene when the van crashed. Was anyone else there??

#groundzeroarmy #frontpagebaby #finallynotblurry #heneedsabettercostume

363k upvotes · 429 comments

…

[Best Comments]

dbsdbs · 21h

I was there! I made a TúTube page and posted my video there (URL LINK). I recorded from when the van crashed to when he runs into the crowd. It was my first time seeing him in public. He actually passed close by me. So cool! And he does have red eyes! I think he has blonde hair, but it was hard to see with the hood.

285k upvotes · 124 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| takoyakibaby32 · 18h

|| *Oh my god, you are a lifesaver. Any other videos I found were so blurry and shaky, and yours is SO clear! Look at our Ground Zero go. I was on the bus when I watched the video and audibly "aww-ed" when the little fox boy stuck to him like glue. Police almost caught him tho. Too close.*

|| 81k upvotes · 65 replies

…

[Newest Comments]

drowninginmargs · 10m

Looks like Best Jeanist is helping the police with their investigation on this new human trafficking ring. Glad this is being taken seriously! The traffickers are obviously targeting people with visible animal mutations, and my friend is absolutely terrified right now. I hope Best Jeanist and the police can nip this in the bud fast. But I wish Ground Zero could be a part of the investigation too… since he brought it to light…

·_·_·

"What happened to your foot?" Aizawa asks immediately. He is still covered in bandages from head to toe, though less so than a week ago.

Katsuki pauses at the entrance of the sportscaster's box, the open door letting the loud chatter of several management students predicting today's prospects on the floors below. He rolls his eyes and limps through the door, letting it slam behind him.

He and his removable boot expected nothing less from his prying teacher.

"Sprained my ankle."

The chase happened nearly a week ago. Katsuki sat outside of a walk-in medical clinic until they opened in the early morning to see if they could heal his ankle. However, the clinic only had a doctor who could reduce inflammation and a nurse who could cure minor wounds. They suspected multiple fractures, but without an x-ray at a larger clinic or hospital, they could not be sure of the damage. They did the best they could, reducing some of the swelling and alleviating some of his pain. But no matter how much he assured his parents it was only sprained or rolled, nothing too serious, they dragged him to the hospital.

The clinic was correct, and Katsuki had to get surgery. Thankfully, instead of inserting a bunch of metal plates and screws into his ankle, the two orthopedic doctors had quirks for fusing bone together and repairing soft tissue. All that is left is four more days with his foot stuck in this removable boot, and he can walk normally again.

His mother did not yell this time.

She grilled him on how the hell he got *multiple* fractures, but she did so in an even voice. And *that* was unsettling. He liked it better when he could see how mad she was. Especially since, after she

finished questioning him, she just hugged him tightly, cupped his face in her hands, and stepped out of the patient room for a couple of hours.

Katsuki thought only his father had the ability to scare him with affection.

“Visit Recovery Girl during the lunchtime intermission anyways,” Aizawa orders. He looks Katsuki dead in the eyes. “To be sure.”

“Fine,” Katsuki replies, dragging out the word in annoyance. The damn thing is basically healed, no harm in proving Aizawa wrong. “Why am I here?”

Present Mic swivels around in his chair from peering out the large glass windows. He clasps his hands together as an excited grin tugs at his face. This is definitely his idea, whatever this is.

“We—”

“You.”

“*I* thought,” Present Mic corrects, frowning childishly at Aizawa for a second. “You should help us give commentary! It’ll be so much fun! And it’s a *great* way for you to be a part of the Sports Festival without actually being *in* the festival! Aren’t you happy?”

Katsuki is not happy.

“No, thank you,” he finally replies. “In fact, I should visit Recovery Girl, like Aizawa suggested, right now.”

“Sit down,” Aizawa says pointedly, and Katsuki clicks his teeth.

He plops down in the chair between his teachers and looks out into the enormous arena. News reporters, journalists, pro heroes, and regular civilians pile into the stadium-style seats. Management students bustle about, selling various drinks and snacks. A small television crew shoots video of the stadium from the inside as a remote-controlled drone flies above.

Aizawa clears his throat.

“We have three rules.”

Katsuki throws up his hands.

“I didn’t even do anything yet.”

“Bakugou, kiddo, you have a tendency to be *a little* much. And we want this event to stay family friendly. That’s all,” Present Mic chimes in, trying not to laugh.

“Rule number one: no cursing or other foul language. Rule number two: any criticisms you have to offer must be *constructive*. And rule number three: lighten up. Remember, this event is supposed to be fun,” Aizawa explains. Though, the man does not look like *he* wants to be here either.

Katsuki deadpans.

“I’ll lighten up when you do, Aizawa.”

“Watch the sass, kid.”

“Is that rule number four?”

Aizawa stares at him with a dangerous glint in his eyes, and Katsuki mutters an apology.

Present Mic checks his phone, snickering.

“Oh, we’re starting soon!”

He clicks the intercom button on his microphone.

“Gather around, everyone! This year, all your favorite high school kids will let their youth run free like a bucking bronco… The Yuuei Sports Festival has begun! Everybody! Are you ready?” He leans in closer, an enormous smile on his face.

“And let me guess, all you miscreants came to see them, right? The freshly-formed miracle stars that shrugged off a mass villain assault with the wills of steel!” Present Mic pats Katsuki on the back as he speaks.

“The department of heroics freshman class! You’re here for Class 1-A, right?”

Katsuki was a little nervous about how much information on the villain attack reached the news, but Yuuei worked hard to cover up his involvement with Kurogiri, Noumu, and Shigaraki. The news reports did talk about the class as a whole, naming names and giving some background to the students, but most of them hyped up All Might’s presence there, labelling him as the main hero of the day.

Midnight steps up on the small stage in the middle of the arena as first year students crowd around. She whips her flogger with the snap of her wrist, cocking her hip to the side.

“Now, now, kids, quiet down!” she directs. “Let’s hit it off with a few words from the Player Representative, Katsuki Bakugou of Class 1-A!”

Katsuki looks to Aizawa, then to Present Mic.

“You see me, right?”

After a beat, Aizawa clears his throat.

“Tell me you discussed this with Nemuri,” Aizawa says to Present Mic. “She wasn’t at his meeting with Nedzu, just the following meeting with the police, remember? Does she even know he’s disqualified?”

“Uh,” Present Mic chuckles, shrugging sheepishly. “Must’ve slipped my mind?”

Students look around themselves for a person not present. A soft murmuring covers the stands. An event coordinator frantically runs up on stage and whispers something in Midnight’s ear.

She goes red in the face.

“Why am I only hearing about this *now*?” Midnight snaps, loud enough for her lowered microphone to pick up. She turns back to the crowd, clearing her throat. “Ahem, unfortunately,

Bakugou cannot participate in the Sports Festival. However, as the highest scorer and a fellow student, he has an interesting perspective. So, he is helping Eraserhead and Present Mic deliver today's commentary… Bakugou, smile and wave for us!"

The big screens all flicker to his spot in between Aizawa and Present Mic. Disgust immediately flashes on his face, and he displays his middle finger for the world to see. He may be here, but he is not going to *like* it.

The cameras cut from the sportscaster's box as Present Mic frantically covers his hand, and Aizawa scolds him. The appalled look on Midnight's face is perfect.

"That brat, I swear I'll—oh, um, so the runner up Player Representative, Eijirou Kirishima, please say a few words to your fellow students!" she says.

Katsuki snickers inwardly as he watches Kirishima jog onto the stage.

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Student Tournament Matchups: Midoriya vs Shinsou, Todoroki vs Sero, Jirou vs Kaminari, Iida vs Hatsume, Ashido vs Aoyama, Tokoyami vs Yaoyorozu, Monoma vs Kirishima, and Uraraka vs Tsuburaba.

Katsuki limps down the narrow arena hallway, his hands shoved into his pockets. Aizawa was not joking about visiting Recovery Girl during lunch intermission.

The Sports Festival has been pretty boring so far. The first challenge was a four-kilometer obstacle race. The second challenge was a human calvary battle. Well, watching Midoriya blast himself across the minefield from Rambo 3 was highly entertaining. The nerd managed to trip Todoroki and narrowly take the first-place spot. Crafty bastard. Other than that, he watched the kids run around like headless chickens as Present Mic did most of the commentary.

Katsuki never went to these events as a pro. The Sports Festivals stopped for quite a few years after the war, so he only participated his freshman year. But they were reintroduced as a way for people to return to a sense of normalcy even if they were not as popular as now. The Genius Office always sent a few sidekicks or management staff members to scout out the new talent and write up a list of potential interns to nominate. He can admit that they got some great sidekicks out of those internships. And him. Genius was *nothing* without Katsuki, especially since the big man himself became more of a figurehead of the agency when Katsuki turned twenty-six, enjoying his fashion empire and his position on the Neo Hero Commission Advisory Board.

And Katsuki *loved* to remind him who was the star of the show.

The last challenge of the day is a tournament between the top sixteen students. He should thank Principal Nedzu for pulling him out of the Sports Festival. Because no matter how annoying they are, Katsuki does not have a dying need to fight children.

He turns the corner and almost freezes when he sees Endeavor walking briskly in his direction. He looks disgruntled, like a bad taste was left in his mouth, and he cannot get rid of it.

Katsuki wonders if the fire beard is really necessary. He glances at the floor and limps down the hallway as the Fire Hero Endeavor strides towards him. If anyone thought his stare was intense, Endeavor's eyes are ten times worse.

Stay on task, Katsuki. He is on his way to Recovery Girl. She will check his ankle, tell him to stop being reckless, and then he can go back to beating up people at night in four days like he already planned.

However, just before Katsuki can safely pass the man in the hallway—the heat rolling off his large build is almost suffocating—Endeavor's eyes flicker towards him. He frowns.

"You're the student commentator," he states simply.

Katsuki limps for a couple more steps before he decides flat-out ignoring the man will probably get him in trouble.

"Yeah," he answers curtly, crossing his arms.

"I understand now why you couldn't participate," Endeavor continues, gesturing to his injury. "A shame, but even someone who placed first in the exams is no match for my Shouto."

Katsuki stares at the man.

"Although, your participation would've been welcomed. To show the world just how perfect the boy I made is. If only he could get over his ridiculous rebellious phase," he says, a slight growl to his voice. He looks Katsuki straight in the eye. "You're classmates, right? Is he acting out in school?"

"Acting out?" Katsuki repeats, stretching out each word.

"Refusing to use his fire side. Refusing to fully utilize both of the gifts I gave him," Endeavor explains snappily, expectation in his eyes.

Katsuki blinks owlishly at the man.

Does he hear himself when he talks?

This is not an Endeavor that Katsuki can handle. Not that he interacted with Shouto's family much in the future—swapping recipes with Fuyumi was the usual—but his father was not this much of an asshole. Not anymore. The Endeavor of the future was a retired hero consultant who was brought into mission briefs for his expertise every now and then. He was someone who, when Shouto and Katsuki talked shit about the man to his face, laughed lightheartedly or made that absurd cry for his son like a kicked puppy.

This man must have gone through a hell of a transformation because the shitstain standing in front of him is on thin ice.

Katsuki narrows his eyes at him.

"This is why your children hated you."

Endeavor jerks his head back, eyebrows furrowing in confusion as if Katsuki's words were not very clear. "Excuse me?"

"Stop talking about Shouto like he's your prized show dog. Besides, it's his fucking body. He can do whatever the hell he wants with his quirks because they're *his*," Katsuki says. He steps up to Endeavor. The heat of the man's quirk hits his face like an indirect warning. "Are you even trying?"

“Trying *what*?” Endeavor questions with a scowl.

“Are you even trying to be his father? He’s your *son*, or did you forget that entirely? Can you even do the bare minimum?”

In that moment, a rush of relief and gratitude washes over Katsuki’s body, he feels almost dizzy by the emotions. Because Masaru is nothing like this man. He is lucky he has a father who cares about his wellbeing; who takes off from work to spend time with his son; whose hugs are so warm and filled with love, Katsuki could melt under them.

A father who, every time Katsuki stopped a dangerous villain on national television, would immediately call him for two things: to ask if Katsuki is all right and to tell him that villain did not stand a chance against his son.

A father who believes in his son no matter what happens.

“Watch your tone, *boy*,” Endeavor spits. “What does a child know?”

This *child* knows enough.

Irritation bubbles in Katsuki’s gut, low and deadly. His fingers slowly curve into fists, his mind working out the best way to break Endeavor’s nose. Knock that fire beard right off his face.

Katsuki stops.

He breathes deeply, raising his hands in surrender.

“I talked out of my ass,” he says in an unapologetic tone. He turns to limp away. “I already got suspended, so I’m leaving before I start a fight with the second-best hero.”

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Katsuki misses more than a few of the tournament battles by the time Recovery Girl finishes berating him for another sketchy injury and sends him off. When he reaches the sportscaster’s box, the kid with the copycat quirk is dodging an attack from Kirishima and tripping him out of the ring. The look of pure condescension in his crooked smile makes Katsuki’s eye twitch.

“Monoma advances! He was just too tricky to catch. Nice try, Kirishima!” Present Mic says into the microphone.

As Monoma saunters through an arena exit, Kirishima walks through the other exit with his bottom lip jutted out and his shoulders slumped. Cementoss and Midnight check over the tournament floor before giving a thumbs-up.

“All right! It’s the last match of the first round…”

A plain-looking kid walks out of the opening. He is not from Class 1-A. He steps up to the tournament floor with one hand in his gym pants pocket. His hair is weirdly spiked out at all angles, his oval-shaped eyes look nearly penciled on.

“The boy who huffs and puffs and blows your house down! Kosei Tsuburaba of the Department of Heroics!”

Uraraka walks out of opening on the opposite side of the battle floor. Her back is straight as she strides forward, determination shining on her rosy face.

“Versus! The kid I’ll be rooting for! Ochako Uraraka, also of the Department of Heroics!”

The moment they both step near the middle of the ring, Tsuburaba smiles and says something to Uraraka. His body language is easy, laidback. However, she bristles at his words, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

Katsuki squints at the boy on the large screen. What is he saying? The speakers will not pick it up unless they yell, and he cannot read his lips from this angle.

Midnight looks at both of them before raising her hand high.

“Start!”

Immediately, Uraraka dashes forward. Her body is close to the ground as she runs in quick steps, and she angles her right palm open to grab Tsuburaba. She clearly wants to decide this match fast, and the best way is to make him float. But before she can reach him, Tsuburaba sucks in a big breath and blows.

Uraraka slams into a wall of air.

She bounces off, hitting the floor on her back, her teeth gnashed together.

She does not stay down for long.

She rolls onto her feet and sprints forward again, circling around the boy flashing a guilty smile. She fakes right and sprints left, quickly reaching for his shoulder.

Another wall of air smashes into her face and pushes her back. Her feet lift off of the floor as she flies back a bit, smacking her head on the ground.

“There’s just no getting around Tsuburaba’s defenses,” Present Mic narrates. “I’m starting to feel bad for her!”

Aizawa reaches around Katsuki to smack Present Mic on the back of his head with his cast. “Don’t say that. No one cares if you feel bad for her.”

But it keeps going for a while. Sprint, feint, block. Uraraka cannot find a good opening. Pro heroes in the audience start murmuring loudly. Katsuki cuts his eyes to the stands when one of the extras gives a nervous shout.

“Hey! She’s a girl, man!”

His partner leans over to him, tugging at his cape and speaking too low for anyone outside of their section to hear. However, the big screen flashes to their section, and Katsuki can read his lips. *“Must be tough fighting a girl, though. Like, what’s he supposed to do?”*

Katsuki curls his upper lip in irritation. What the hell do they mean? Fuck them, those sideshows are not worth watching. He watches the stage directly.

Uraraka stumbles back again. She is breathing hard, bruises littering her body, with her hands curling on her knees.

Tsuburaba scratches the back of his head. Why is he fighting like this anyways? All he is doing is defending. If Katsuki had his quirk, the second he knocked his opponent back with an air wall, he would spit air from his mouth like a pistol. Knock his opponent off guard, grab them, and then fling them out of the ring.

But this kid is not even trying to knock her out of the ring. He is just halfheartedly throwing up a shield.

Tsuburaba opens mouth again, gaining only Uraraka's attention. The big screen perfectly displays his face, and Katsuki can read his lips this time. *"You're not going to reach me, so give up, yeah? This is kind of painful to watch."*

He rubs his eyes. No, he imagined that. Read his lips wrong.

The guilty smile on the boy's face says otherwise.

The strangled noise that scratches his throat makes his teachers glance at him warily. He clicks on his intercom.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, you can leave, Tsuburaba," Katsuki spits with vitriol. "And for the *pros* out there. *'She's a girl?' 'Must be tough fighting a girl?'* Are you serious? That kind of attitude will get you killed in the field. Underestimate your opponent; see what happens. I'm surprised any of you made it this far."

He breathes deeply.

"That being said, *Uraraka*, what's taking so long? Fuck him up already—"

"What did I say—"

"That *was* constructive—"

Click.

Aizawa and Katsuki can be seen arguing animatedly in the sportscaster's box while Present Mic's head is down, his whole body shaking and his fist banging on the table.

Uraraka's war cry silences them. Draws everyone's attention back to the stage.

She winds back her fist and punches through his solid air barrier—punches him straight in the nose.

"Wow! What a turn of events! Tsuburaba's wall of air is no match for a determined Uraraka's right hook," Present Mic says enthusiastically.

Tsuburaba trips backwards, holding his nose as blood drips down his hands. He falls to his ass. Uraraka advances forward. And everyone can hear her words.

"I'm still here!"

She touches his face and makes him float against his will. She pushes his flailing body out of the ring before releasing her quirk and watching the boy fall to the ground.

Cradling a quivering hand into her chest, she flashes a proud grin.

“Tsuburaba is out of the ring! Uraraka advances!” Midnight calls, and the stadium erupts into cheers.

Katsuki sits back in his chair and crosses his arms, a small smile on his face.

“We’re not done here,” Aizawa says to him.

“Wait, you were fucking serious?”

“*Bakugou*.”

A moment later, the intercom clicks back on.

“I apologize for the use of foul language. It won’t happen again.”

Students advancing forward: Midoriya vs Todoroki, Jirou vs Iida, Ashido vs Tokoyami, and Monoma vs Uraraka.

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A fool.

A self-sabotaging, overly compassionate, risk-taking fool.

Katsuki could not utter a single word as Midoriya and Todoroki fought. The way in which Midoriya sacrificed his fingers, his arms, his legs—to prove a *point*? To *win*?

To show All Might he can live up to the expectations of his idol?

Was this how his fight with Shinsou went?

Katsuki is unsure if he watched the whole fight. He was so still; he was not sure he was breathing. But every time Midoriya shattered his finger—his arm, his leg—to tear at the shackling bond between Todoroki and his abusive father, a minuscule flinch struck Katsuki’s spine.

It has been over a month since school started, over a year since the boy started training with All Might. And all he has to show is how he can mutilate his body with his quirk? What the fuck?

All Might is an amazing hero, unmatched by no one, but an inkling of doubt settles in his mind on whether he should be a teacher. If the man is capable of mentoring anyone.

The frustration, the scorching fire in Midoriya’s eyes as he shouted at Todoroki to reclaim his power, his autonomy—could he even feel his body crying out in pain? How his skin was a discolored burnt purple under the stress and weight of wrongly using One-For-All?

By the time the fight is over and Todoroki reigns supreme, Katsuki is walking out of the door.

“Bakugou?” he hears Aizawa call, almost mutedly, before the door to the sportscaster’s box slams behind him.

Katsuki rushes into the branch nurse’s office before Midoriya even arrives. Recovery Girl looks up at him from her desk, a walkie talkie in her hand as she fills out a medical report.

“I have a patient potentially in need of surgery arriving in any minute now. I cannot talk right now, sweetie,” she says quickly, getting up from her seat to pull out various supplies.

Katsuki straightens his back.

“I know. Midoriya. Look, I have first aid and first response training. Can I stay and help?” he says.

She does not look away from her task.

“Are you going to actually help me or just yell at the boy?” she asks.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“Whether he’s conscious enough to understand my anger.”

She glances at him again, trying to discern the emotions rumbling behind the calm mask on his face.

“Please,” he presses.

She sighs.

“Don’t upset my patient,” she warns before pointing at the shelf behind him. “There are disposable scrubs behind you. Put them on, wash your hands, and put on the nitrile gloves. You do exactly as I say when I say it.”

“Got it.”

By the time he finishes changing—shoving that stupid boot through the scrub pants before he realizes he could have taken the damn thing off—four med-bots are carrying Midoriya into the office on a gurney. All Might is scurrying behind them in his deflated form.

Katsuki stares at the man who jumps back at his presence.

“O-oh, you’re the student commenter,” All Might says. “Why are you in here?”

So, Midoriya has not told All Might that he knows yet. Katsuki seethes. He wants to yell at All Might too.

“He’s my impromptu student helper for now,” Recovery Girl replies for him, walking over to the infirmary bed the med-bots place Midoriya on. “If you could be so kind as to wait outside as we assess the damage done to this poor boy…”

Midoriya groans, his face scrunching in pain as they wrap his arms in temporary splints and slings, setting his left leg in a splint as well.

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“He’s got a crush fracture in his right hand, and I can’t revert it back to the way it used to be so cleanly anymore. For now, the fragments need to be extracted, so they don’t get stuck in his joints. Healing will come later,” Recovery Girl explains to All Might after Katsuki lets him back into the office. She glances at All Might as if she wants to say more, but she is not sure if she is allowed. So, Recovery Girl knows as well.

He rolls his eyes.

“I already know who the scarecrow is, you don’t need to be secretive with me,” he says in a low voice. All Might looks taken aback, opening his mouth to question him, but Katsuki beats him to the punch. “Not the *biggest* concern right now.”

Recovery Girl continues, her words turning sour and reproachful.

“I hope you realize how big of a hand you dealt in his injuries, Toshinori. *You* made this boy destroy his own body to this extent out of longing for you. *You* lit a fuse in him that led to this detonation,” she says, looking directly into All Might’s eyes. “This is overdoing it… Don’t you *dare* praise him for this.”

Katsuki stays quiet as her words sink in the air, loosely clasping his hands in front of him. He was indifferent about Recovery Girl before, but he definitely respects her now.

The door to the nurse’s office swings open.

“Midoriya!”

“Deku!”

Asui, Iida, Mineta, and Uraraka pile into the room, varying stages of concern and worry on their faces. Uraraka notices All Might’s surprised state and bows slightly to the man.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” she quickly greets.

The boy in question cracks open his eyes at the calls, wincing a bit. “Ah, hey, guys… What’re doing here… What about the next match?”

“It seems that, because of the stage’s total pulverization, there’s a break for repairs,” Iida explains. He glances at Katsuki’s scrubs, cocking his head in bewilderment and distrust.

“We were so worried, we had to come,” Uraraka chimes in.

Mineta rudely points at the boy. “That was so scary, Midoriya, no pro’s going to want to pick that!”

Asui smacks him with her tongue.

“Quiet! Quiet down! It’s nice that you’re worried, but he is being prepared for surgery,” Recovery Girl scolds them, waving her cane and shooing them out of the nurse’s office.

Midoriya whimpers, drawing All Might and his attention. Sweat drips down his face, his eyes screwed shut again.

“I’m so sorry, All Might. I couldn’t keep my promise,” he says slowly. “If I kept my mouth shut… but I had to go and tell Todoroki all of that…”

Katsuki stares at All Might as he stares at Midoriya. Shame riddles the man’s face.

Katsuki does not know what All Might said to Midoriya, but the exact words do not matter. This boy idolizes the man. He knows everything there is to know about the Symbol of Peace. He could tell you which villain All Might defeated and how if you give him a date and time. There was a time when Katsuki could match him in his All Might knowledge, but not anymore.

So, how does the man in question *not* know that Midoriya will push himself far beyond his limits, go to hell and back, to make sure he accomplishes whatever All Might asks him to do? That he will feel like a complete failure if he cannot live up to his expectations?

“You tried to impart young Todoroki with something,” All Might finally comments.

“Yeah, I saw Todoroki looking so sad and butted my nose in… or that’s what I thought. But, in reality, at the time, I was just feeling… regret,” Midoriya’s voice quivers as he speaks. “I lost sight of my surroundings and the way forward… please forgive me.”

“It’s certainly an unfortunate outcome, and don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s an outcome that couldn’t be helped,” All Might says, a pitiful but reassuring smile on his face. “But that ‘butting in’ as you call it is one of the principal qualities of a hero.”

No.

Stop justifying his obsessive need to help others and measure up to the number one hero by breaking himself with pretty words. He cannot help anyone six feet under.

Katsuki sucks in his breath.

“Get out,” he says tersely. His mask is cracking as rage drips from his eyes. He struggles to reel the emotions in, but he can feel the control slipping from his fingertips. He tries his words again. “It’s time to leave. Recovery Girl said he needs to be prepped for surgery, so, visiting hours are over.”

·–·–·

“For the time being, this will be enough treatment for you to walk again,” Recovery Girl explains.

“Thank you so much, ma’am,” Midoriya says, huffing a bit out of exhaustion. He glances at Katsuki too. “Kacchan too, thanks for helping.”

“Fuck you. I’m not here to be your nurse,” he spits.

“*Remember*,” Recovery Girl starts in a warning, bring the attention back to her. “This is what you reap for abusing *you know what* so much in such a short span. Let the warped shape of your right hand be a warning. And don’t expect me to treat wounds like these again.”

“Yes,” Midoriya trails off, getting off the bed to leave. Katsuki grabs his face and shoves him back. “What are you doing—ouch!”

“I said I didn’t come here to be your fucking nurse,” Katsuki snaps, pulling up a chair. “I *patiently* waited for you to stop being delirious, so you’re going to sit there and listen to me. *Got it?*”

He takes a deep breath.

“What the *hell* was that?”

“What?” Midoriya stutters slightly, confusion knitting his eyebrows together.

Katsuki is about to open his mouth again, but he looks at Recovery Girl sitting at her desk and furiously filling out another medical form. She glances at him when the pause in conversation stales the air.

“Oh, don’t mind me, boys. My hands are too full to worry about your little squabble,” she says, bitterness dripping from her voice. She leaves her desk to walk into the backroom of the office.

Katsuki rounds on him.

“Why are you using your quirk like this? Yeah, you idiot, if you focus all of One-For-All into your finger, it’s going to shatter.”

“I… I can’t use it another way. Five percent is as high as I can go without completely blowing off my limbs. Sometimes I can control it to not break my bones, but sometimes I also use one hundred percent by accident.”

“Then, stop doing that!”

“There’s no other way to use it!” Midoriya fires back, matching his volume. “Kacchan, *you* don’t understand. I haven’t trained my body enough to handle it yet. I can’t just use One-For-All like you use your Explosion. I can’t draw it out all the time, or I’ll disable myself. I haven’t mastered it yet.”

Katsuki opens and closes his mouth multiple times. He clasps his hands in front of his face.

Midoriya should figure out how his quirk fits with his body—*maybe* that is what All Might is thinking. Let the boy figure it out himself.

But why does he have to when he has the previous successor mentoring him? *And* someone who has analyzed and fought the damn quirks multiple times *right here*?

What is the point of mentorship if he does not discuss his troubles with All Might, and figure out the means to cross the hurdles in his way? Or to at least have someone tell him when he is blind to the obvious obstacle staring him right in his face?

Katsuki is not going to sit here with his thumb up his ass and not push him in the right direction.

“For all the bullshit you were spouting earlier, how can you not get it?”

“What?”

“*It’s your power,*” Katsuki says in a nasally, high voice. “Sound familiar? Who told you to *handle* it? A quirk isn’t something you train your body to handle, it’s a part of your body. I get that it’s a passed down quirk, but think of it more like a new bodily function. It’s something you should be able to do as easy as breathing. As blinking. So, stop telling yourself to blink and just *blink*. Your first problem lies there.”

Midoriya stares at him until his eyes glaze over and his eyebrows furrow together. He is inside of his head now. Katsuki sighs and props his elbows on his knees, waiting tolerantly until Midoriya's lips start mouthing the thoughts in his head.

"I can't read your mind, nerd. What're you thinking?"

Midoriya sort of jolts out of his head at the sound of Katsuki's voice, blinking a few times.

"I really wish we had this conversation when I could actually move freely," he groans.

Katsuki barks out a laugh.

"Not my fault."

Midoriya makes a face, his nose wrinkling a bit, but he returns to his thoughts.

"I obviously haven't had this quirk as long as you or anyone else in our class. So… I can't just *stop* consciously thinking of using One-For-All. Especially since I've been trying *not* to use it, so I don't injure myself. But that was wrong. I can't use five percent power as unconsciously as blinking if I don't practice that concept. I need to get used to it." He pauses in his musings. "Though, I haven't figured out *how* to practice without injuring my arms and legs. I don't think *blinking* is supposed to hurt. So, what component am I missing? Channeling One-For-All into my finger is too much. To my arm, it is still too much, but less so. Is it the *way* I'm channeling it—"

Midoriya suddenly snaps his head in Katsuki's direction.

"What do you think?"

"Nope," he rejects the boy's hopeful look, lightly shoving his head to the side. "This one's all yours. If you can get this far, you can figure out the rest yourself."

"In Aizawa's words of wisdom," Katsuki continues, dropping his voice a bit and really bringing out the dead in his eyes. "*A hero always has another trick up his sleeves*."

"Oh my god," Midoriya says, scandalized. "That was a horrible impression of Mr. Aizawa."

"Shut up. It was perfect."

Students advancing forward: Todoroki vs Iida and Tokoyami vs Uraraka.

.-.-.

Katsuki stays with Recovery Girl for the remainder of the Sports Festival. It beats having to be in the sportscaster's box and listening to Present Mic's loud voice.

He is not sure who wins the Sports Festival, but he does not care. However, if he has to pick a student, he probably chooses Tokoyami.

But that is not his main concern right now.

Katsuki stares up at the Genius Office. Without participating in the event, Best Jeanist will not nominate him to intern at his agency. No one will nominate him. If he wants this internship, he needs to state his case to the man himself.

He pinches the bridge of his nose.

The last time he visited his ex-mentor, he was delusional, scared, and frazzled with being in the past. He got thrown out.

He has no clue how it will go this time, but he hopes a clear head and even voice will at least land him a meeting.

Katsuki pushes through the glass doors.

Chapter End Notes

Airi freezes as a familiar face pops onto the television during the Yuuei Sports Festival. Hibiki skips into the room, only to come to an abrupt stop when she notices the screen. She bursts out laughing.
“A child,” she says, her voice shaky.
Airi sucks in a sharp breath.
“No!”

Note A: I’m relaying the Sports Festival placings I decided on here. Tokoyami got first place. Todoroki got second place (should’ve used his fire side). Uraraka tied for third place with Iida (who couldn’t stay for the awards).

Note B: The Red Yaksha’s Quirk = Pushback.
If this villain punches something with his right fist, its physical form reverts back to what it was 15 years ago as well as travels back in time to its location as well. It will end up where it was 15 years ago at that time. Katsuki was sleeping in his bed 15 years ago on the same day as the drug bust. Now, things change if you are an inanimate object/device versus a living organism. Inanimate objects have the ability to stay in the same timeline because they physically cannot alter it. People, animals, insects (termite queens can live for 50 years), etc., are exponentially more likely to alter the timeline/create a branched off timeline because they cannot act exactly as they did 15 years ago. Only their physical body was reverted, not their mind.
So, the quirk can basically remove you from the timeline you used to be in.

They say the devil that you know is better than the devil that you don’t

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki was supposed to help Aizawa and Present Mic with the Sports Festival commentary, but yelling at Endeavor and Midoriya is more fun.

Tentative Chapter 12 Post Date: June 27, 2021

This is part one (out of four) of the field internship arc. This arc’s song titles are from “Leave Me Alone” by I Don’t Know How But They Found Me. The second flashback scene is from the year 2029.
I’m also learning more about the role of Japanese homeroom teachers.

Warning: mentions of torture in the first flashback scene in Katsuki's POV.

._._. **Shouta’s POV** ._._.

Shouta groans, rolling over in his bed. His hand slowly emerges from under the warm comforter to pat around on his nightstand for his blaring cellphone.

If Hizashi is calling him at the crack of dawn, he is putting salt in his coffee the next time he sees him.

The school is closed for two days to let the students rest after the Sports Festival. As a teacher, he is granted extra time to catch up on grading, lesson planning, and compiling a list of hero agency nominations for each of his students.

However, he does not need to do so at 5:15 in the morning.

He pushes the comforter off of his head and rolls onto his back. Bleary eyes stare at a lit screen. The number calling him is not in his contacts. A Central Tokyo area code.

Probably a spam call, he thinks. And yet, something compels him to tap the call button. The need to chew out the spammer and make them question their life choices, maybe?

The composed and polite voice on the other end of the call surprises the drowsiness out of his body.

“Hello. Is this Mr. Shouta Aizawa, teacher of Class 1-A at Yuuei high school?”

Shouta clears his throat.

“Yes?”

“Pleasure to speak with you. This is Tsunagu Hakamada. Best Jeanist, if you are unfamiliar with my name.”

He pulls the phone from his ear to stare at the device. He glances around his room. He is definitely awake.

Raising the phone back to his ear, Shouta questions, “To what do I owe this early morning call from the Best Jeanist himself?”

Someone starts talking in the background, and Best Jeanist’s voice sounds muted for a moment.

“I apologize; we are very busy. I will cut to the chase, your student, Katsuki Bakugou visited my office and asked me to sponsor him for Yuuei’s field internship week. Surprisingly, he was far more civil than the first time he barged into my agency, but an unruly child cannot pretend to behave forever.”

Wait. Hold on.

Shouta’s eyebrow twitches as his morning brain works overtime without caffeinated assistance. There is a lot to unpack in that answer.

First, this is the *second* time Bakugou visited Best Jeanist? And why did he travel all the way to Tokyo to ask this specific hero to sponsor him? When did he find the time to—is this why he stormed out of the sportscaster’s box? To *network*? Shouta did not expect the boy to never come back, but he never fails to surprise him.

He told his students that if they did not receive a nomination, they will choose from a list of forty agencies that Shouta curated. They will get the list the day after tomorrow.

So, what is so special about this particular hero?

Best Jeanist continues to speak.

“Bakugou cracks pretty easily when you point out his obvious imperfections. And when he struggled to keep his voice level, I asked him why he is so fixated on me. Just what he hopes to accomplish here when he is so clearly drawn to my office due to my popularity and success in the hero charts. I thought it would be easy to uncover his ill intentions once he was worked up. Do you know what he said to me?”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me,” Shouta comments, a slight bite to his words. He is not so keen on the idea of his student being bullied into messing up.

There is a soft huff over the phone. Almost a laugh.

“Red in the face and gripping his knees, he said, ‘Even if I had a million heroes to choose from, I’d still choose an asshole like you. Because I know, if I don’t try to save this relationship now, I’m going to lose something important to me in the future.’”

Best Jeanist is quiet for a moment, letting the words settle over the phone. He hums lightly.

“To be entirely honest, Mr. Aizawa, I wasn’t planning on taking any interns this time since I am neck deep in three different private investigations. However, I will make an exception for three days, depending on your answer to one question: Why should I take this ticking time bomb as my intern?”

Shouta is a little more than speechless. This is not how he expected to wake up today. He shakes his head to focus his thoughts, stepping out of his bed to pace around the room.

Regardless of how utterly reckless barging into a hero office was, Bakugou was trying to establish a connection to further his chances at being a pro hero—possibly even extend an olive branch for his previous mistake of a first meeting. Establish a relationship he deemed important to him. Why he decided Best Jeanist was the man for the job, Shouta is unsure, but he is not going to hurt Bakugou's chances. He still feels guilty for the kid's abrupt removal from the Sports Festival, so if he wants to intern at the Genius Office, he will support his choice. Within reason.

"First, I apologize on his behalf for showing up unannounced at your agency. Bakugou is quick to act when he thinks what he is doing is right," Shouta begins, a growing headache pressing against his temples.

"Bakugou has areas he needs to improve, but so do the rest of my students. These field internships are a means for my students to learn from successful heroes and help them realize their shortcomings and ways to overcome them. I'm not saying he won't be a handful, but I also need you to understand, your frustration will be worth it. He has a lot of untapped potential that, with the right mentors, will make him unstoppable."

He pauses in his monologue to give the man a chance to speak, but Best Jeanist stays quiet on the line.

"Bakugou is a student who will surprise you when you least expect it—if you haven't garnered that from your conversation already. So, without a doubt, you'd be lucky to have him as your intern."

._._. **Katsuki's POV** ._._.

(Flashback: Year 2032)

The door to Best Jeanist's office slams into the wall. Katsuki stalks into the large room, molten lava dripping from the glare in his eyes. He throws his hands in the air.

"Why the hell am I still considered 'on vacation'?"

His boss flips the page in his hardcover book, stabbing at the colorful salad on his desk. "Katsuki. Always a pleasure to have you in my office unannounced."

Katsuki skips the sarcastic pleasantries.

"Why do Camie and that new guy have my patrol routes? My missions? I discovered half of those damn operations; you can't give away my shit."

Best Jeanist glances up from his book to read Katsuki's face. His face, initially amused, now turns concerned.

"Please tell me you're kidding," he says, putting down his fork. "Katsuki, you just finished physical therapy."

"I'm fine now. I want to come back."

“You can’t possibly be ready.”

“Why the hell not?”

Best Jeanist stares at him, folding his hands together and composing himself.

“Don’t play this game with me. The man who wrote me a detailed report on his captors, especially when I told him not to, should know why.”

“You needed that report. Don’t pretend like you didn’t,” he fires back, crossing his arms. “They didn’t expect me to live, and I had valuable information.”

“I didn’t want you to have to relive your experience so soon,” Best Jeanist reasons, speaking in a slow and careful tone. But he throws caution to the wind with his next words. “They cut off your hands.”

“And Eri gave them back,” Katsuki states dryly, waving his hands in the air for his boss to see. “So, I’m not understanding the problem.”

“You are not all right after this.”

He will be “all right” because he says so.

They pulled one over on him. He can admit that much.

Villains sometimes have this idiotic notion they can convert Katsuki to their side. To work for them and become their muscle. He is not exactly sure why they think so, but this notion has led to successful undercover missions. A pro hero looking for a change in management in an age where being a pro hero is not a popular career choice anymore. Where a hero either lives in the reality of the field or the televised propaganda. Where the rate at which new pros switch out of the field within their first year is 33%; and the rate at which pros are found dead is 37%. So, number seven hero or not, villains open their doors to the Katsuki Bakugou, blind to the consequences.

Except this terrorist group caught on to the ruse.

They baited the Hero Commission, letting information trickle down to their spies, and another undercover mission found its way to Katsuki’s desk. He was sent to them like a lamb to get slaughtered.

They videotaped him for two days.

They planned to spread the footage online with a live broadcast debuting their group. To desecrate Japan’s up-and-coming Symbol of Victory, and put the pros back in their places. To show the world that, just because these new heroes have gained traction, they are still shit. They cannot protect you —they cannot even protect themselves. They will always fail you. Let you down.

If this group were a little smarter, they would have live broadcasted his torture instead of acting like they were editing a Hollywood movie. By the time the rescue team found their hideout, the terrorists fled in a panic, vowing to achieve their goal with the next hero symbol. Unfortunately, his rescuers were more concerned with Katsuki’s state than catching these idiots.

Fine. He will find them. Return the favor.

He would like to see them try to touch another "symbol" by the time he is finished with them.

"Shit happens, and then you move on," he says, a wave of resignation washing over his body. Best Jeanist does not look convinced. Katsuki rolls his eyes, hard. "Don't look at me like that. I don't need your pity, and I sure as hell don't need to be coddled."

"Katsuki."

"Tsunagu."

Best Jeanist sighs barely audibly, leaning back in his office chair.

"I can't tell if this is you bottling everything up, but you know you don't have to, right? There are plenty of qualified professionals you can talk to you. I doubt your ranking will drop if you take more time off."

Bottling it up?

He does not bottle up his emotions. He shoves them in a banged-up box that haunts the back of his mind and lets them fester. He separates his emotions from the events that try to defeat him.

He removed himself from the situation, watching through distant eyes as they took a serrated bone saw to his strapped down arm, looking all too disappointed in his lack of response to metal teeth ripping through his skin—his bone, his muscle—in repeated, sloppy motions.

What can he say? He cannot be beat in a game of endurance.

His heart thuds slow and heavy in the confines of his chest, the organ drowning in a viscous liquid. Scraping desperately echoes in his mind from the locked metal box. It threatens to escape, to sink its claws in his brain and infect him with nasty viruses.

He takes a deep breath, digging his nails into the palms of his hands, forcibly grounding his body in the present.

Katsuki chooses to focus on the second part of his boss' response.

"You and I both know I don't give a fuck about my rank."

"There's a very popular video of you trying to blow up pro hero Deku after he received a place higher than you—"

His eye twitches.

"—And I'd do it again, but, right now, I don't care about that little rat pulling one over on me," he snaps, exhaling sharply. He lowers his voice a bit. "I just want my job back."

"Katsuki, I'm not going to force you, but at least consider seeing someone. Please."

If it makes his boss feel better, he will research different professionals, but he can take care of himself just fine. He has gotten this far without breaking like some of the other pros. He cracked the code.

All he needs is his work.

All he needs is the suffocating pressure to be the best—the constant validation from thrashing these extras into dust and saving those in need—and that goddamn scraping noise will shut the hell up.

"Give me my job back first."

·_·_·

"Morning, Kacchan! I didn't know you took the train at this time too," Midoriya greets just as the train doors slide open and everyone squeezes inside.

"I usually don't. Thanks for giving me another reason not to," Katsuki comments, elbowing a salaryman when the corner of his briefcase hits the back of his knees.

"You don't have to be a jerk about it," Midoriya mumbles in return. He angles his body away from Katsuki, busying himself with his phone. Bandages wrap around his fingertips and disappear under his blazer.

He sighs. Midoriya, unfortunately, has a point. He does not have to be mean, especially since this younger version of his friend does not fire back with even meaner retorts. But it is too early in the morning for a change of heart.

"Hey, bro… Bro!" someone says from behind Katsuki. "Midoriya of the Heroics Department! You were great in the Sports Festival. And pretty close, too! Top 8, right?" A thumbs up shoves its way between him and another passenger.

Midoriya's head snaps up from his phone at the man's call.

"Ah…"

Other passengers turn to look at him, joining in on the compliments. Then again, it does not look like Katsuki needs to be nice at all. He watches the boy sweat under the attention with mild amusement.

"You were so cool, man!"

"O-oh…"

"You're actually pretty short, huh!"

"Uh…"

"You really reminded me of the good old days, for me."

"Oh yeah, I get what you mean. That *desperation*!"

Katsuki snorts. That desperation really was something.

Exiting the train, they pull out their umbrellas to shield themselves from the dreary skies and pouring rain. The walk is quiet. Katsuki is ninety percent sure Midoriya is only walking next to him because heading in the same direction makes walking separately quite awkward. His eyes flicker in his direction. A little smile graces Midoriya's face as he stares at the wet ground, sometimes kicking at the puddles in the pavement with his signature red shoes.

The existence of that smile irritates Katsuki.

He smacks the back of his head.

“Ow!”

“Don’t let your newfound fame go to your head,” Katsuki says.

“I can’t if you beat it out of me,” Midoriya hisses, rubbing a hand through his unruly curls. He opens his mouth to continue, but a booming voice cuts him off.

“What’re you two doing walking so leisurely? There’s only five minutes before homeroom!” Iida scolds, speeding past them in a large raincoat and rainboots. “Get a move on!”

“Ah,” Midoriya trails off, staring after Iida’s retreating back. He quickly turns to Katsuki. “I’m going to go ahead. Are you free after school? I think I figured out my *blinking* problem.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you later! See you in class!”

He runs ahead, disappearing around the corner.

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A song of greetings fills the air as Aizawa walks through the classroom door.

“I’m happy you were able to remove your bandages, Mr. Aizawa,” Asui comments. Katsuki can see the hints of relief on her face, her shoulders sagging a bit.

Aizawa rubs at a scar around his eye.

“The old lady got overdramatic with her treatment,” he explains in a grumble. “But let’s put that aside. Today’s Hero Informatics period is a little special.”

“It’s time to formulate your codenames. Your hero names.”

The class erupts in a cacophony of cheers and excitement, students jumping out of the seats and pumping their fists into the air.

“Oh my god, yes!”

“Now this is making my chest swell!”

The menacing aura emanating from Aizawa quiets his classmates down. He continues his explanation.

“This is related to the draft nominations by pros I mentioned the other day. However, these nominations matter more after you’ve gained experience and your adaptable fighting ability is judged during your sophomore and senior years. In other words, the nominations you’re getting this year are more akin to expressions of interest in your future potential. It’s not rare that that interest dries up by graduation, or its simply unilaterally dropped.”

Hagakure raises her hand.

“So, the nominations we receive are like personal hurdles, then?” she notes.

“Yes,” Aizawa affirms. He picks up the remote for the smartboard, clicking on a preset list. “Now, the tally of nominations is as follows.”

Todoroki: 4,123. Tokoyami: 2,256. Uraraka: 360. Iida: 301. Yaoyorozu: 272. Kirishima: 108. Jirou: 68. Kaminari: 20. Sero: 14.

Bakugou: 2.

“Typically, the results are more balanced, but this year, all the attention leans towards Todoroki and Tokoyami.”

“Wow!” he hears Uraraka exclaim.

“None, huh. I was afraid of that,” Mineta says solemnly.

Jirou pokes Katsuki with her pencil. Her face is the definition of incredulous.

“How did *you* manage to get two nominations? You weren’t even in the Sports Festival.”

“Don’t hate the player, hate the game,” he snickers. He catches Aizawa’s attention amiss the class chatter. His teacher narrows his eyes at him, the annoyance just barely contained.

“Bakugou. I received a phone call after the stunt you pulled.”

Katsuki folds his hands together on his desk.

“Which one?”

“*Which*—I wasn’t aware of the other stunt, but it makes sense now,” his teacher says, exhaling sharply. “You need to remember that you are a student of Yuuei. Your actions represent this school. No more unannounced visits. Next time you get a *big idea*, talk to me *first*.”

“My bad.”

After Best Jeanist cooked him over an open fire, and he collected his seared pride off of the floor, Katsuki made another stop in central Tokyo. It is difficult to flag down someone who is always on the move around Japan, and it was pure luck she was even in the area at the time.

She refuses to hunker down and build a hero office, neither now nor in the future.

However, social media is a special place. Katsuki tracked her activities through Herogram.

“Why would I do that!” Miruko exclaims when Katsuki finally catches her in the lobby of her hotel.

“Why not? I get an internship, and you get an extra set of helping hands. Looks like a win-win to me.”

“I don’t need to take an intern, and I work better when I can fight freely on my own. Sidekicks aren’t my thing.”

Katsuki crosses his arms. “Good thing I’m not some sideshow. I don’t do sidekick.”

Miruko pauses at this for a second. A hearty laugh booms in the lobby, drawing stares of awe at the famous rabbit hero.

“I like your attitude, kid! But that doesn’t change the fact that team-ups slow me down. See yah!”

She gives a short wave before turning to leave through the sliding doors.

“So, all I have to do is not slow you down?” Katsuki does not move from his spot, but he raises his voice to reach her. “I can do that. Better yet, I’d like to see you keep up with me.”

She snorts, stopping right before the entrance. A hand sits on her chin as she draws out a thoughtful, closed-mouth interjection.

“I’m not going to give you guidance or anything. I don’t teach,” she states.

“Good. I’m tired of everyone telling me what to do,” he replies immediately.

Her laugh booms in the air once more, and she whips around in her spot. A large grin dawns her face. “All right, I’ll give you a nomination. You can stick around as long as you keep up.”

His luck is seriously looking up.

Talking with Miruko has always been easier than talking with Best Jeanist. Autonomous personalities, similar morals—whatever it is, something just clicks for them.

He was prepared to spend the whole week with Miruko, but on the second day of compulsory rest, Best Jeanist called his mother to discuss possibly sponsoring Katsuki for a few days. The morph of pure shock into unadulterated excitement on his mother’s face had him matching her energy in the living room. His father walked in on the two jumping in a circle as if they were performing a shaman’s ritual.

After sorting the dates out with each hero, Katsuki will spend the first three days at the Genius Office and the last four days with Miruko. Everything just needs to be approved by Aizawa.

Honestly, it could not be more perfect. Katsuki is still shocked both heroes agreed. A small smile tugs at his face, and he ducks his head to hide the excitement. It will be like his university fellowship days.

Aizawa reigns the class in once more. “Regardless of whether or not you received any nominations, I’ll have you all get some so-called, ‘work-place experience,’” he says, grimacing a bit. “Well, you’ve all dipped a toe in the world of pros, unfortunately. But I think experiencing the activities of pros firsthand will be more fruitful training than before.”

“And ‘cause of that, we need hero names, huh?” Sato surmises, turning to Uraraka when she raises her fists in excitement.

“Things have gotten fun all of the sudden!” she says, a large smile on her face.

“Of course, placeholder names are fine too, but something appropriate—”

“Because if not, it’ll be hell from there!” Midnight interrupts Aizawa from the classroom entrance. “The names you pick now, the names you come to be known by the world as now, in many cases, they stay that way after becoming pros.”

“Well, she is correct,” Aizawa says, pulling out his emergency sleeping bag and taking a seat in the corner of the class. “I’ll be having Ms. Midnight evaluate your naming sense since I definitely can’t.”

Midnight gives the class thirty minutes to come up with their hero codenames. And as his classmates work, small groups begin to form.

Katsuki stares at his blank dry-erase board lying on his desk.

He does not quite know how to feel. While his class is animatedly going through possible names, he *should* roll his eyes. Be indifferent. He *has* a hero codename. Technically, he has two “hero” codenames, but he has yet to accept the second one.

He does not need to formulate his codename because it already exists—will exist.

But the swirl of doubt in his stomach makes him pause.

With all of the bullshit he has caused, does his current self live up to his pro hero name? Live up to Dynamight, the Symbol of Victory?

Was it a victory when Himari Takahashi lost her ability to walk? When he let his teacher take his pain during a villain attack, the same teacher who told him his judgement was wrong? When he almost screwed over his future when Kamui Woods tried to apprehend him? Was it a victory when a frightened kid asked him to stay, looked to him for comfort from a traumatic experience, and Katsuki could not grant that wish?

The decisions he made so surely in the future make him pause now. And this pause, this stutter of doubt in his actions, makes him wonder if he can be the man he was before.

As his classmates excitedly decide on names that will go down in history, Katsuki sits at his desk, quiet.

A chair slams onto the tile in front of his desk.

“Hey, bro! Want to work together?” Kirishima asks, but he sits down regardless of Katsuki’s response.

“Didn’t think this was a group exercise,” Katsuki responds, blinking his worries to the back of his mind.

“Yeah, but it can be fun to bounce ideas off of each other!” Kirishima says. A sheepish smile worms its way onto his face as he rubs the back of his neck. “Well, to be honest, I’ve had my hero name picked out since middle school.”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah,” Kirishima flips his filled-out board around so Katsuki can see. “I’m going with Red Riot.”

“A Crimson Riot fan, huh,” Katsuki hums knowingly, and Kirishima’s eyes light up.

“Dude! You know about Crimson Riot? He’s kind of retro, so not a lot of people immediately think of him. But he’s the kind of hero image I’m aiming for!”

“I used to know an idiot who couldn’t stop talking about him, so I’m pretty well-versed.”

Kirishima sets his board on the desk. “What about you? What’re you thinking for your name?”

Katsuki clears his throat, his voice lowering just a bit in the loud classroom. “I was thinking of going with Dynamight, but I’m not sure. Not as attached to the name as I used to be.”

“But it sounds cool—wait,” Kirishima abruptly stops talking, a sly smile on his face. “Do you mean dynamite or dyna-*might*?”

Katsuki knows what he is getting at, but he refuses to give the boy the satisfaction.

“Yes.”

Kirishima clicks his teeth, grumbling, and he snatches Katsuki’s blank board. He quickly scribbles out his suggestions. The smirk returns as he flips the board around.

“Which one?”

Katsuki rolls his eyes and points to the All Might reference. Kirishima lights up, excited, and taps his fingers on the desk.

“Do it! Then, we can be the same! I’m going to choose Red Riot regardless, but then I definitely won’t be the only one honoring another hero.”

“We’ll see,” Katsuki says, erasing both options off of the board.

After the thirty minutes are up, Midnight calls for everyone to return to their seats. Each student will present their hero names to the class while she critiques them. Katsuki closes his eyes and listens to the names of heroes that persevere into the future. Names that change into something darker. Names that walk away from the field. Names that perish.

“Bakugou?”

Katsuki slowly opens his eyes at Midnight’s voice. He looks down at his blank board.

“Yeah, that works,” he says.

“You want to go with your family name?” Midnight asks. He nods once, and she shrugs. “Okay, it’s your decision.”

.–.–.

After first period ends, Aizawa stops Katsuki from leaving the room. He hands him a packet of papers.

“I talked with Recovery Girl, and we set up Tuesday and Thursday sessions for you the week after your field internship,” he says as Katsuki flips through the packet. “Those are for you and your parents, so they are aware of these sessions. Schedule, initial survey, things to expect, letter from Chiyo—those types of things.”

Katsuki closes the packet with a snap.

“Wonderful.”

Aizawa looks him in the eye.

“I’m not punishing you, Bakugou. I also cannot force you to attend these sessions. Tell me now if I just wasted my time,” his teacher says.

Katsuki presses his lips together. This is not the first time a concerned teacher or mentor asked him to seek help. He is *fine* because he says—he knows—so. But it is possible something is a little… off.

“No,” he finally says, struggling to pull the words from his mouth. “I’ll do it.”

“All right. Just try to talk to her. You never know, it may be exactly what you need. And if you have any concerns, you can always come to me.”

“I didn’t know you were an option.”

“I’m your homeroom teacher, kid. I’m always an option. Maybe I wasn’t clear about that before, but you brats are always on my mind.”

Katsuki raises his eyebrows. Subconsciously, he knows his teacher is trying to look out for him, for all of them. However, it is different when the action is spoken into existence. He covers his nose and mouth with one hand and takes a step back.

“I’m allergic to the energy we’ve created here.”

Aizawa inhales deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Get out of my class.”

._._. **Izuku’s POV** ._._.

“Uh, I don’t think we’re allowed to be in here,” Izuku says, trailing behind Kacchan as he pushes open the doors to Gym Gamma.

They have never had a class inside this gym before, and he breathes a little easier seeing the vast space empty. Kacchan has already been suspended, why is he risking *another* punishment? Though, Izuku cannot think of another place they can practice away from prying eyes. He has yet to see a security camera or security bot loitering around or inside of the gym.

Kacchan glances back at him, rolling his eyes.

“Then, why’s the door unlocked?”

“That doesn’t mean we can be in here,” Izuku says, shuffling through the door and internally jumping at the loud slam behind him.

“Do you want to test your little quirk or not?”

He makes a face at the patronizing wording, but he does not press further. This is the closest to *kind* Kacchan has been in years. He should take what he can get. Although, it is still amazing—weird, unsettling—that they are even holding conversations now. They even walked to school together today without breaking into a fight—well, less of a fight and more of a one-sided display of power and hierarchy. Astonishing, really.

Immediately after their last period, Izuku grabbed Kacchan before he left, so they could finally discuss his discovery. He has been waiting all day to tell someone about this! He figured out a way to use his quirk automatically and decrease his reaction time immensely. To flip all of the switches in his head from the get-go, so he does not have to waste time directing power to a specific place. On separate occasions, Mr. Aizawa and Kacchan both told him his first problem lies here. How he needs to make his quirk his before he can make it something more.

And after churning their words in his head nonstop, he finally came to a solution during the second day of compulsory rest!

As they warm up on the gym floor, he uses the stretching silence to explain his discovery.

“Do you remember when Uncle Masaru used to take us camping?” he asks. Kacchan looks up from his pike stretch, a single eyebrow raised.

“No.”

“Oh,” Izuku says, wetting his dry lips. He sucks in a quick breath. “Well, he did. We were like, uh, six? You might’ve been seven. I actually dreamt about it the other day—actually, it was more like a nightmare because you turned into a 12-foot bear that spit grenades and tried to maul me, but that’s beside the point. I figured out my problem because I remembered those trips. Because I’m a marshmallow!”

Izuku beams triumphantly, looking expectantly at the other boy, but the expression on Kacchan’s face makes him falter. The slightly vacant expression where Kacchan’s eyebrows do not quite bunch together, his eyes squint a bit, and his mouth sits ajar as if he wants to speak but not even his words know what is happening.

Wait, he did not explain that well.

“Okay, um, let me backtrack. So, you remember how we roasted marshmallows over the fire every night, right? Oh, no, you don’t remember. Well, we did! And Uncle Masaru taught us how to rotate the marshmallow slow enough to evenly crisp the outside of it. You kept stealing my marshmallows because you kept burning yours on one side—if you’re wondering that’s when you turned into a raging bear and attacked everyone in my dream,” he chuckles nervously, swallowing thickly under Kacchan’s intense stare.

Izuku screams internally. *They can hold conversations now*—he mocks himself in his head. Not when he cannot speak like a normal person. He stares at his shaking right hand, willing the appendage to stop.

"*Anyways*, I'm the marshmallow! I've been using my power unevenly like your burnt marshmallows. Trying to push my power into my arm or leg takes too long because I first need to think about pulling the power out and sending it to that limb. And then I hurt myself because it's too much too fast. I burn myself. But if I start out by evenly distributing my quirk throughout my whole body—like *my* evenly roasted marshmallows—then I can move more naturally. I can move faster and finally use this quirk like it's my own. That's my solution," he finishes, standing up and shaking out his wrists.

That camping trip when he was six years old was the last trip Uncle Masaru ever took him on. He is unsure if Uncle Masaru and Kacchan ever continued the trips without him, but Izuku did miss them. Kacchan was a tyrant on the best of days, regardless of whether Izuku was labeled quirkless or not. However, Izuku is not sure the boy realizes he matches the energy of the people around him. Without the usual audience behind him, and with his dad smoothing the air between them, Kacchan was more subdued. His laugh was less sinister, his smile more genuine, his walls razed. Izuku did not really get it at the tender age of six, but he did know those trips were always really fun. And bittersweet when the return to normalcy arrived.

Kacchan cracks his knuckles in the quiet after his explanation. There is a small, pensive frown on his face.

"My marshmallows were not that bad," he says.

Of all the responses Izuku expected, that was not one of them.

"They always caught on fire. You completely burnt one side every time," he points out.

"Maybe I liked them that way."

"Then why'd you keep stealing mine?"

"Are we going to do this or not?" he finally snaps, crossing his arms. And Izuku has to cover his mouth to stop the laugh bubbling in his throat.

Note to self, this Kacchan likes to change the subject when he is losing a verbal argument.

Izuku might not understand his childhood friend as well as before, but he can learn again. He has filled several notebooks with analyses on quirks and pro heroes, so research is nothing new to him. Actually, the day after the villain attack, he should have started a new notebook on Kacchan. Recorded the changes and similarities in his childhood friend.

He will do that now. Because he does not believe Kacchan, no matter how many times he says nothing happened. No matter how many times he says he is fine.

What is with his friends? Not just Kacchan, but Iida as well. No one seems okay. He grimaces. No duh, Izuku. Why would Iida be all right after learning his brother was hospitalized?

Izuku only heard about what happened to Ingenium on the news after the Sports Festival. While in pursuit of a criminal, out of nowhere, a villain who murdered 17 heroes and crippled 23 beyond the point of recovery attacked him.

The hero killer. Stain.

And Iida had not said a single word about it. He only reassured Izuku he was fine. Izuku wants to punch the word, “fine,” so his friends can never use it again. Banish it to the abyss.

A small explosion erupts from the palm of Kacchan’s hand. His foot taps the ground impatiently.

“Get out of your shitty head already,” he snaps. “I don’t have all day.”

“Right. Sorry,” Izuku apologizes impulsively.

He closes his eyes and tries to concentrate. The heat, the raw power, that he transferred to a single body part before… He holds the image of carrying this heat uniformly across his whole body. Steadily. At all times. His knees jerk at the shift in his power. It is like lightning striking his spine! The energy buzzes under his skin, barely contained. It runs through his fingertips, irritating his scars.

One-For-All. Five percent.

Full Cowling.

When he opens his eyes again, he is met with a ferocious and toothy grin.

“Fucking finally,” Kacchan says in a laugh. He cracks his knuckles. “Now, we’re getting somewhere.”

“It’s working,” Izuku says through gritted teeth. He curls his fingers into fists.

“Can you move?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Only one way to find out,” Kacchan says. Izuku does not like the poorly veiled enthusiasm in his voice.

He hears the explosions before he registers the movement. Kacchan flies forward, the grin on his face sharpens, his eyes widening in excitement. He propels his body into a flip, gaining momentum, and aims a tornado kick at Izuku’s face.

Move!

In a panic, Izuku puts his all into dodging. He recoils at the rush of power to his legs, his bones creaking under the weight, and his body lurches to the left. He barely shoots his hands out in time, catching himself as he slams into the gym wall.

“Behind you, idiot!”

Izuku flinches at the warning shout. He ducks, narrowly missing an explosion to his head.

Stop aiming for his head!

He sweeps his leg, trying to knock Kacchan off of his feet, but he forces the boy back instead. Using the movement in his favor, he jumps up and sprints forward. He pulls his fist back. Jade lightning gathers and sparks haphazardly around his arm, and he throws a punch at Kacchan’s face.

He swears he hears a snort.

Kacchan times his explosions perfectly, shifting backwards and moving in sync with Izuku's fist.

Kacchan hastily grabs his extended arm and flips Izuku onto his back. As he slams into the ground, One-For-All snaps off completely. The spell breaks.

Izuku puffs out a heavy breath, staring up at the ceiling. Frustration wells deep in his stomach. The itch of disappointment causes his fingers to twitch. An extended hand obscures his vision.

"For a first try, you weren't terrible," Kacchan admits, reluctantly. Izuku grabs his hand, and stumbles upon shaky feet. He looks down at his hands, and a frown pinches his face.

"Damn it," he curses to himself. "It's tough just keeping it going, how am I supposed to fight and keep it up at the same time? And I underestimated how much speed I gained too. I'm nowhere near __"

A hand smacks the back of his head, forcing him to stumble forward again.

"That was your first fucking try. You reacted fine; you just need practice. Quit the self-depreciation, and let's go again."

He rubs the back of his head, looking at the floor. His speed at five percent did not faze Kacchan at all. Regardless of how predictable his punch was, the speed of it should have at least surprised the other.

"Your instincts are amazing, Kacchan," Izuku says. Kacchan huffs, rolling his eyes.

"I got my ass beat by far worse speed than that," he says, wiping his hands on his shirt. "I'm nowhere near fast enough, but your current self isn't going to trip me up. That's for sure."

"Who—"

The gym doors burst open.

Izuku whips his head towards the entrance, a feeling of dread filling him at the thought of them being caught for using the gym without permission. Instead, he watches All Might rush through the doors. His hands grip his knees as he catches his breath.

"I am here!" All Might wheezes. "Looking for you, young Midoriya. A nomination! You received a nomination."

._._. **Katsuki's POV** ._._.

"So, I actually…"

"Yep."

"Over a year ago?"

"Yep."

“You saw the whole thing?”

“From the motherfucking bushes.”

“Oh my,” All Might says, almost breathless. He rubs his hands over his face before propping up his head, elbows digging into his knees. “Thank you, young Bakugou, for keeping this secret to yourself all this time. It is pertinent the knowledge of One-For-All stays between a select few.”

“I don’t have any problems keeping my mouth shut,” Katsuki replies, averting his eyes from the man’s embarrassed demeanor. “But I want in on this little club. If it’s a power inherited from the greatest hero, it must be important. And with what I’ve seen so far, the nerd needs all the help he can get.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Midoriya mutters under his breath.

All Might nearly blew the gym doors off their hinges, trying to relay the news. Midoriya received a nomination from All Might’s old homeroom teacher, Gran Torino. Katsuki had never seen the man sweat so profusely or shake so violently just from recalling the old days with his teacher.

But all of that had to be put on hold to address the elephant in the room. Katsuki.

Now, they sit in a small meeting room in Yuuei. A long coffee table separates two stiff couches with All Might on one side and his students on the other.

All Might nods slowly, more to himself than either of his students.

“As much as I hate to burden you with keeping this secret,” he says, turning to Midoriya, “having a friend your age who understands your situation can help further your progress.”

“You’re right,” Midoriya agrees.

“So,” Katsuki draws out the word, rubbing his hands on his pants. “Why is this quirk so important? What’s the deal with One-For-All?”

He needs to keep up appearances. To All Might and Midoriya, he is operating on limited knowledge of this quirk. It is passed down between predecessor and successor. It enhances strength and speed. It manifests differently from user to user. That is all he is supposed to know. Even the last tidbit of information may be pushing it.

But he remembers how Izuku griped sometimes about how hard it was learning about One-For-All and All-For-One from All Might. The man held the information tight to his chest, only delving bits and pieces when the *time was right*. Though Izuku also tended to backtrack every complaint, no matter how minor, feeling guilty for badmouthing the man.

Katsuki wonders if he can move that learning process along a bit faster. He grips his knees. Anything he can do to speed up Midoriya’s progress is crucial.

“You both probably discuss this quirk all the time. I want to catch up. That’s all,” Katsuki lies.

“Actually, I never asked,” Midoriya admits, guiltily. “I was so hung up on trying to master it, I never asked about its origins. Sorry, All Might, I am very interested in the history of One-For-All… I just had a bit of tunnel vision.”

All Might swallows thickly. Two pairs of eyes look at him expectantly, drinking in the change in his demeanor. The straightening of his back. The serious air draping over his shoulders.

“It’s a special quirk, as you know, and the same goes for its origin,” All Might begins. “One-For-All is derived from a separate quirk which has existed since the beginning.” He pauses in his explanation, clasping his hands together in an almost meticulous manner.

“All-For-One,” he says. “It robs others of their quirks and renders them the user’s. It’s a quirk that can also grant these quirks to others.”

“All-For-One,” Midoriya tests out the name. “It’s just like it sounds.”

All Might lowers his head to stare at his clasped hands.

“It started during the dawn of the quirk phenomenon when society had yet to adapt to the shift. There was a time when the norm for what it meant to be human suddenly crumbled away. That’s all it took.”

All Might explains in a low voice the spiral and downfall of civilization. How an age of upheaval grew from the razed rubble, and how one man rose to the top. A man who stole people’s quirks and, through his overwhelming power, spread his influence. He dealt in people, pawns to him, and piled up malicious deeds to his satisfaction, taking control of Japan in the blink of an eye.

“I see the rumors all the time on the internet, but I thought it was fiction. I mean, it’s not in any of our textbooks,” Midoriya says.

All Might smiles humorlessly at his inquiry. “The dealings of underworld thugs and yakuza don’t make it into textbooks. People with power want a place they can use it, after all,” he says.

“But how is this connected to the story of One-For-All?” Midoriya asks.

“I told you, didn’t I?” All Might says. “Either he placed his trust in those granted quirks, or they were meant to make them submit to his oppression. However, the bodies of those whom he granted quirks couldn’t handle the strain, and many of them became virtual dolls without speech.”

“Just like Noumu,” Katsuki interrupts, the words leaving his mouth like honey dripping from a spoon.

Midoriya recoils at the statement. He glances at Katsuki who refuses to return the probing stare.

All Might nods.

“Yes. But there are also special cases. Ones who were granted quirks that mutated and blended together.”

He speaks of the man’s quirkless little brother. The small and frail little brother who harbored a strong sense of justice, and how the brother was opposed to actions of the man. And yet, the man forced a quirk that stockpiles power upon his little brother. Whether this *gift* was out of kindness or to bend him to his will, it is unknown. However, the little brother who was thought to be quirkless did possess one prior. Neither he nor anyone around him ever noticed—never noticed the meaningless quirk that could only grant itself to another.

“And so, the quirk to stockpile power and the quirk that could pass itself on merged together. That is the origin of One-For-All,” All Might explains. “It’s pretty ironic, huh? How justice is always born from the bowels of evil.”

Midoriya waves his hands in front of his body.

“Wait, hold on, I understand how One-For-All was created, but about that bad guy from so long ago… how can he still be alive?”

“He can steal quirks,” Katsuki answers. His voice still feels sluggish, his lips like cement. “Keep up, will you?”

He digs his nails into his knees. Funnily enough, the pinpricks of pain in his knees make him think of the splatter of thumbtack holes on the walls of his future studio apartment. The memory feels like it is nudging him from the conversation, nudging him from the present. He applies more pressure to his knees. He is supposed to be listening, not daydreaming.

All Might looks at him cautiously.

“Right, so anything goes, including a quirk that stops or slows his aging,” he says.

The man is a Symbol of Evil. A symbol that will live on indefinitely. The gap of power between the man and his brother was enormous, and the state of society at the time only worsened. The brother who suffered defeat decided to entrust it to the next generation. Though he could not defeat the man, his power would accumulate little by little, predecessor to successor, and it would someday become able to stop this evil once and for all.

“And I was the successor to finally beat him!” All Might exclaims, his shoulders sagging a bit. “Or so I thought. But he’s still alive and on the move once again. This time as the brain behind the Villain Alliance.”

“One-For-All is the power handed down through generations to defeat All-For-One. And you, too, might have to confront that man, that great evil, in a final showdown,” All Might says.

Midoriya’s hands interlock together as predecessor and successor stare at each other. The snowballing revelation of One-For-All and All-For-One thickens the air. All Might almost looks guilty for speaking, as if he said too much too fast. But before he can open his mouth, Midoriya stands up.

“Whatever you task me with, I’ll answer to your call, All Might,” Midoriya declares, clenching his hands into fists. “As long as you’re with me, I can do anything. I can feel it. I know it’s true!”

The distraught expression on All Might’s face—the unsaid words sticking to his throat that can destroy his pupil—it haunts Katsuki. This talk of fallen societies and immortal symbols. Of evil that will not fucking die. He screws his mouth into a scowl, but every action still feels so lethargic.

And every blink feels like a fist *banging* on a door.

Katsuki did not attend All Might’s funeral. He did not keep up with the news reels or the special televised events. He avoided the media attempts at preserving a fallen symbol subjected to intense public criticism during a perilous time.

Bang.

He did not visit the man's grave. And he never would have if not for Izuku asking him, in withered words, to accompany him to the secluded area years later. It turned out neither of them could bear seeing the single headstone alone.

Bang.

Katsuki stares at the deteriorating man in front of him. The soul-sucking stress of One-For-All gripping his shoulders. How can he keep up appearances that everything will be all right? How can he preserve the admiration and determination this boy feels when he may not live to see the fruits of those feelings?

To see the poisonous juices that run from that golden fruit?

Bang.

All Might was not there to see the deeper consequences of picking up the mantle. All Might was not there, but Katsuki was. Even when the two of them were several thousand miles apart, he still saw.

And the more All Might holds back, the more frustrated Katsuki become with the man. He wants to scream at him, to tell him to rip the damn Band-Aid off already. But his thoughts stop him every time.

Because how can Katsuki judge when he cannot bring himself to tell just one person the secrets *he* holds close to his chest? In fear of telling the wrong person and screwing everything up?

He is no teacher. And he is shit at supporting people. What even is the right way to do any of this?

Bang.

Someone bangs on his door four times.

Katsuki is a light sleeper. One knock does the trick, but four sturdy thumps let him know who is at the door. He is not surprised to see Izuku standing at his door. He is surprised to see him barefoot.

"I dreamt about it again."

Katsuki does not need to ask what the dream was about. He moves to the side to let him in. Izuku keeps his head down as he sluggishly passes Katsuki at the entrance.

"Coffee?" he asks.

"Tea."

"Tea makes you tired."

"Yeah."

"Did you break anything when you woke up?"

“Yeah.”

“My furniture isn’t suffering your nightmares. You get coffee.”

“Okay.”

Katsuki gestures to the couch, watching Izuku shuffle to it as he starts his coffeemaker. The young man sits down silently. He snatches the large, weighted blanket and wraps it around his body like he has done many times before, burrowing himself in the material.

“If you sit like that, you’re going to feel it in your knees later.”

Izuku does not answer, nor does he move. Katsuki waits for the dark liquid to finish dripping into the forest green mug, adding a splash of milk and two teaspoons of sugar.

“Here,” he says, shoving the steaming mug in Izuku’s face. He crashes onto the couch next to him, rubbing his palms into his eyes to wipe away the drowsiness.

He stares past the television and at the undecorated wall. There are several tiny holes splattered across the wall, left there from the previous tenant. He has not lived in this apartment long. Has it been a year already? A year since the both of them returned to Japan?

Katsuki still remembers the first phone call between the United States and India, the silent words and shaky breathing and barely contained whimpers. How weird and daunting it was. And now, solace seized through phone calls morphed into physical visits.

He hates it.

Katsuki counts the holes, listening to Izuku softly blow on the drink and slurp.

“ ‘It’s your turn,’ ” Izuku says in a quiet voice. “He kept saying, ‘Now, it’s your turn,’ in that condescending voice of his, pointing at me from beyond a big screen. But my body wasn’t there, I was just a husk of myself. Layers of bloodstained and dirty cloth, cobbled together into my hero costume. But I wasn’t inside. It was me, but I wasn’t there.”

There is a cloying eeriness to Izuku when he remembers his war against All-For-One. A chilly demeanor that almost makes Katsuki shudder. Makes the strands of hair on the back of his neck stand up.

And Katsuki should never feel on edge around Izuku of all people.

But it is there. Like a faint warning bell ringing in the back of his mind. A reminder that the scars Izuku endured sink deeper than his skin. A reminder that something ugly and twisted lurks just beyond his cloudy, green eyes.

He hates it.

“My greatest fear, I realized it then. When All-For-One tried to blow up me and the pro heroes. When I split away from them. From All Might. Did you know that?”

Katsuki zones in on one pinprick hole on his wall. A miniscule, black dot in a sea of aged beige paint. He focuses on the dot because if he focuses on Izuku’s words, he will remember how he was

uselessly sitting in a hospital bed while Izuku had to pull an entire country out of hell. And by the time he caught up, it was too late.

"Stop thinking about it," Katsuki says hastily, unsure if the demand is directed towards Izuku or himself. If they stop thinking about it, it will go away. It always goes away if he wills hard enough. But a constant reminder will foil his remedy.

"Do you want to know what it is? My fear."

"No," Katsuki says with more force than necessary. A sharp cut of rejection made in self-defense. "Just… I think a new season of Slugger came out. I haven't watched it."

He reaches for the remote.

"I'm turning it on."

"Okay," Izuku says. His voice is frigid.

*He hates that he won*ders how Izuku is doing in the future. Hates that he sees the stark differences in the boy just starting out and the man he becomes. Of course, he wants to prevent a war from breaking out—wants to prevent Japan from sinking into another broken society. But the reason he confronted Iida and Uraraka about their intentions of friendship, the reason he inserted himself in Izu—*Midoriya's* relationship with his idol… Because Katsuki cannot sit around and uselessly watch Midoriya break a second time around.

He cannot force himself to forget the memories so intertwined with his emotions. He cannot run away to another country because the shame would not stop beating his back.

He will change fate.

"Gran Torino… Was he compelled to nominate you because my guidance is lacking? The thought of him taking up his hero name just to nominate you is terrifying."

All Might's petrified voice shocks him from his thoughts like a bucket of ice water.

Katsuki's eyes flutter for a moment, the banging noises recede and the memory that felt so real disappears. All that is left is the unnerving feeling of being on edge. He slowly looks to the other two people in the room. The conversation somehow shifted back to Midoriya's field internship sponsor.

He unclamps stiff fingers from his knees, rubbing sweaty hands on his pants before crossing his arms. Thank fuck All Might and Midoriya get stuck in their own little world quite easily. It does not look like they even noticed his slip in the discussion.

Katsuki watches All Might's antsy nerves infect Midoriya, both of them quivering in fearful anticipation of the field internship.

"Sounds like a stand-up guy," he says, his voice sounding normal again.

All Might visibly swallows. "Yes… although it's still my duty to train you… since you were nominated, you should go learn what you can from him, young Midoriya."

Oh, you're a big shot here, but nobody else knows

Chapter Notes

Last time, Class 1-A picked their hero names, and Katsuki felt unworthy of carrying the name, "Dynamight." Midoriya tests out his quirk, All Might confesses the origins of One-For-All, and Katsuki dissociates.

Part two of the field internship arc. Song title is from "Leave Me Alone" by I Don't Know How But They Found Me.

*I received a comment about creating a playlist for the chapter titles since they're song lyrics, and I will! I just need to make sure these titles are set in stone first. I'll let you know when I make it and where to find it.
Also, thank you for the bookmarks, comments, and kudos. You guys are amazing. Thank you for reading!

Tentative Chapter 13 Post Date (updated): July 15, 2021

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Internship Day 1 –** Monday ._._.

"You are five minutes early," Best Jeanist notes as Katsuki walks through the front door of the Genius Office with his hero uniform case and his rolling suitcase. "Good. To be early is to be on time, and to be on time is to be late. Punctuality is an important aspect of becoming a proper hero."

Katsuki is surprised Best Jeanist never plastered his famously overused words (*to be early is to be on time*) on a wall. They were rarely directed at him, but Camie received them several times for her tardiness. Frankly, Katsuki shares the same sentiment as Best Jeanist. He tends to arrive at least fifteen minutes earlier than necessary, but Aizawa's announcements this morning held him up.

"I wasn't going to be late on my first day," he says, biting back the profanity he typically uttered. When he visited, Best Jeanist berated him on the way he "degrades the Japanese language with his tongue." He hopes he can get in the man's good graces fast enough, so he does not need to hold his damn tongue anymore.

Best Jeanist hums at his answer, turning and motioning for him to follow. "We have a quaint dorm setup on the third floor for my sidekicks who wish to use it. You will take one of the bedrooms there for the duration of your internship. There is a full kitchen available, so you may make your own meals, or you may visit the many shops in the area. Regardless of your choice, I will provide you with a food allowance."

The two of them take the elevator to the third floor of the building. Best Jeanist's hands are clasped behind his back the entire time. They step out into a spacious commons with a kitchen and living area. The bathrooms are located to the right, and five dorm rooms are to the left. Katsuki is given a keycard to room five.

Best Jeanist gives him time to drop off his luggage and change into his hero uniform, waiting by the large glass windows. By the time Katsuki closes the bedroom door behind him, pocketing the keycard, Best Jeanist is gazing at the shopping district across the street of the hero agency. He does not turn around.

“I do not need to remind you how your attitude has consequences. I believe I got my point across during our little meeting,” he says. “From your attitude the first day we met to your unruly comments during the Yuuei Sports Festival, you cannot expect to be a proper hero with the way you carry yourself. Through this internship, I will show you how a top hero should act in the eyes of the public.”

Best Jeanist turns in his direction. And in his hands is a paddle brush.

Katsuki recoils.

“No.”

His boss takes a step towards him. Katsuki takes a step back.

“A proper hero must tighten up both mind and body. And we will start with your hair.”

“Don’t come anywhere near my head,” he warns.

He inherited the bomb of blonde that sits atop his head from his lovely mother. And neither of them has managed to use a brush like that without breaking it. That offending tool will only rip his hair out. Do not test his hair. Besides, it is near impossible to tame it. At least his mother manages to make the explosion on the top of her head a fashion statement.

A fleeting wave of déjà vu washes over him at the familiarity of this situation.

“It will only take a second. Then, you will be fitted for my signature jeans, and you will join me and observe a Genius-level patrol.”

“No, it damn well won’t take a second,” Katsuki hisses, quickly forgetting his profanity rule. He takes as many steps backwards as Best Jeanist takes forward. A wall finds his back. “I’ll lose enough hair to make a wig by the time you get whatever you want. I’ll wear the shitty jeans, but you’re not brushing my hair. I’ll blow it up, I swear.”

They stare at each other. Best Jeanist raises the brush, and Katsuki presses against the wall as if he can phase through it. The amusement in his boss’ eyes annoys him to his core. But with amusement comes compromise.

“All right, Bakugou. You don’t need to look so scared. For now, no brush,” Best Jeanist relents, pocketing the brush. “Ryoko, our receptionist, will take your measurements for your jeans on the first floor.”

He was not *scared*.

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Although the light blue, straight-cut jeans are a bit restricting, Katsuki can at least walk. Ryoko was not given the same liberties as she waddled around him to take his measurements.

Katsuki walks next to Best Jeanist as they head down the sidewalk. This patrol route loops around the shopping district and to a neighboring community park. It is the shortest patrol he has ever been on, and Katsuki wonders if Best Jeanist altered the route because of him.

As they enter the shopping district with people flitting around trendy stores, they attract the eyes of enamored fans. Well, Best Jeanist does. The man walks like a model. His long and graceful strides, his perfect posture, they garner the attention of raised cellphones and excited gasps. He is an expert at determining how much interaction with civilians is necessary to appease their interest without having to engage every single one of them. A wave here. An autograph there. And Katsuki is left taking pictures for brave groups of friends and families who asked to pose with the popular hero.

“You see, Bakugou, you will be judged in the eyes of the public for every action you make,” Best Jeanist says to him as he waves at a gaggle of giggling middle-aged women. “From patrolling as a hero to enjoying a day off as a civilian. Nothing you do will go unnoticed. How you act, how you present yourself, is important to gain the trust of the people.”

“I’m not a dancing monkey,” Katsuki mutters.

But is he sure about that? Granted, when he was physically in his late twenties, less people fawned over heroes, but for certain ones, there was always a spark of interest in their eyes no matter what atrocities occurred over a decade ago. The occasional head nod or ruffling of an infatuated child’s hair was not a problem when he was on patrol. People understood to leave him the fuck alone, whispering and taking pictures from afar. They especially knew to avoid him like the plague when he was off duty on those rare days of rest. However, he was not able to evade all the events the Genius public relations department shoved in his direction. Usually, Best Jeanist would cover them for him as the official figurehead of the agency while Katsuki got to do what he does best.

Unfortunately, the department learned Camie could wear him down.

He hears a soft huff. The signature quiet laugh of his boss.

“I hope not. A dancing monkey is ungraceful. However, it is difficult to save someone who is scared of you or holds certain biases against you. And it will be difficult for you to join any hero agency if all they see is your horrible attitude,” Best Jeanist says.

“I’m sure my actions will speak louder than my words,” Katsuki counters.

Best Jeanist hums at that.

“Words are not as quiet as you think. There is a power in speech far greater than what a simple brawl can accomplish. A power that can command a room or stop a war. That can poison or cure a mind. That can garner one’s trust for a lifetime. On the other hand, if you yap on too much, your words will turn against you. If you lie too much, you will fail to convince. If you constantly speak baseless insults and profanities, people will stop listening.”

Katsuki stays quiet this time. The familiarity of his boss’ words swirls in his body. It is not the first time they have had this sort of conversation. Best Jeanist has told him time and time again to watch his words, to think before he speaks. And he does, for the most part. Unless someone pisses him off spectacularly, then it is open season. He cannot be held responsible for his disappearing brain-to-mouth filter if the person deserves it.

Reminiscing over the years, he is much more succinct with his speech. Less barking Pomeranian. As he has said before, yelling all the time is exhausting. No one has time for frequent screaming matches. But his boss is not going to see that from the limited evidence he has stacked against Katsuki.

“Oh, wow! Best Jeanist in the flesh,” someone exclaims, popping up in front of the pair. A young man with a scruffy beard and a collared shirt stands before them. He has a voice recorder in his hands and a lanyard around his neck, dangling some sort of identification card. Reporter. “What luck! I was just finishing a story on the pancake shop over there. This isn’t my area, but my colleague would skewer me if I didn’t give her some interview about the case she’s covering. I’d love to ask you some questions about the human trafficking investigation if you’ve got the time.”

Katsuki perks up at his words. He read a bit about the investigation online. The Musutafu Tribune ran a short piece after he stopped the van, highlighting some speculations of their own as well as the investigation the police and Best Jeanist are conducting. Tokyo News picked it up as well. Best Jeanist has not mentioned the case at all since Katsuki arrived, and that is frustrating. He would rather work on that instead of fixing his oh-so-horrible attitude.

“The Musutafu police and I will be holding a short press conference tomorrow on the case; however, I can answer a few questions now,” Best Jeanist comments.

“Great! I am Koki Watanabe with the Tokyo News. Sorry, sometimes I forget to introduce myself,” Watanabe says. “Would you mind if I recorded this conversation?”

“Not at all. Please go ahead.”

“Thank you! My first question is the one on everyone’s minds. It’s been a couple of weeks since the investigation began. When can we expect this human trafficking ring to be eradicated?”

“Well, investigations of this caliber require time and patience. We need to be meticulous in our approach to apprehend every last trafficker. We gathered a team of experts and specialists to curate an appropriate plan of action and victim recovery. With this plan, we established a few leads. We understand how nerve-wracking this new threat may seem to the public, but we ask that you stay vigilant and report any information you may have to the Musutafu Police Hotline.”

Translation: The investigation is at a standstill, and they are scrambling for new information.

Katsuki holds back a scoff. The reporter nods quickly, persuaded by his boss’ calm words. Katsuki is fluent in Best Jeanist bullshit. Their current leads must be hitting a wall. But he doubts he will get any real information about the investigation through the news, this impromptu interview, or the press conference tomorrow. The police are not going to give away crucial information on national television. They are going to reassure the public they have everything under control while the traffickers laugh behind a screen.

“Thank you. My second question is related to the scope of this operation. Is the human trafficking ring only in the city of Musutafu? I am interested in whether residents of other prefectures should be worried as well,” Watanabe speculates.

“We have not found any evidence of trafficking outside of Musutafu; however, we cannot rule out the possibility of nearby cities in other prefectures fall victim to this ring,” Best Jeanist answers.

“Makes sense. My third question is related to the social media buzz. Many people believe the vigilante, Ground Zero, should be a part of the investigation. What are your thoughts?”

Best Jeanist furrows his eyebrows.

“While we are grateful the trafficking ring was brought to light through the actions of this vigilante, his participation in this case is not up for discussion. His very existence is another illegal operation. That of an unlicensed or fake hero. However, if he has any information about the ring, he should come forward either in person or through the hotline.”

Translation: That vigilante can fuck off or be detained.

Katsuki doubts Best Jeanist is thrilled a vigilante made the news headlines or that one is strangely popular with the people. It goes against his morals on what a proper hero should be. Katsuki looks away, letting the interview travel to other ways the public can get involved to Best Jeanist’s experience with cases like these in the past. Eventually, they part ways with the satisfied reporter and continue on patrol through the shopping district.

“So, where exactly are you stuck?” Katsuki asks.

“I don’t follow.”

Katsuki huffs.

“You didn’t answer that reporter’s first question about the investigation. What leads did you follow and what didn’t work? Was it the license plate on the van? Are the kidnappers not talking?”

Best Jeanist stops walking to look at him head on. His eyes crinkle.

“I am glad you are taking an interest in investigative work; however, you do not need to concern yourself with this case. These three days will be spent improving how you carry yourself and your image as a hero-in-training,” he says. He taps Katsuki’s back with his fingers. “Speaking of which, you slouch when you stand. And stop stomping the ground as you walk.”

Katsuki narrows his eyes, but he straightens his back. He was barely slouching. “I think this internship would be better spent working on the case.”

“And that is why I am here to guide you. The way you think is wrong.”

Katsuki is going to pop a blood vessel with this Best Jeanist.

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The rest of the day is spent in a Genius intra-agency meeting room. His boss lectures about fixing his speech, his posture, and his facial expressions. They work on brainstorming and creating his brand as a hero—some squeaky clean, disgustingly proper hero. And he tries to attack him with that brush again. Katsuki explodes the damn thing as he swore he would do.

That earned him another lecture.

Katsuki is unsure if he can play this excruciating game with his boss again. Best Jeanist and he butted heads on a lot of topics, but at the end of it all, Katsuki’s frustration was worth it. He came out a better hero, and Best Jeanist a better mentor. Compromise was always like a tug of war

between them until one of them gave in or the rope snapped at the middle. But the harder each of them tugged, the clearer their reasons for disagreeing became. The clearer the holes in either of their opinions became.

Katsuki sits back against the headboard of his bed, scrolling on his phone. He decided to take a break from his nightly activities during his field internship in favor of putting all of his focus in building these relationships with his future mentors. Getting caught by his boss would not look good. However, without carrying out his night patrols, he is at a loss for what he should do to pass the time.

A fleeting thought tells him normal people would recommend sleep.

He *does* sleep. He is much better now than when he first returned to the past. When he sneaks out at night, depending on the crimes that occurred, he usually returns home early enough to snag a two- or three-hour nap. And when he had that stupid removable boot on his foot, he could do nothing but sit around, spend time with his parents, and sleep. As always, the price of extended rest was exhaustion and soreness shoved through his stiff bones to his twisted muscles. Fucking annoying.

And he is not unreasonable. He takes Sundays off; something he never did as a pro hero.

But he is not getting used to slipping in bed by nine PM.

Katsuki's phone vibrates as another group chat notification pops up on his screen. He sighs. Not only has he been ignoring the group chat Ashido, Kaminari, Kirishima, and Sero roped him into over a month ago, he has been refusing to eat lunch with them as well. It is too weird. He assumed they would have kicked him out of the chat or Kirishima would have given up trying to talk to him by now. Apparently, Kirishima's stubbornness is unrivaled in any time period.

Fuck, he is bored enough to check that stupid chat.

electricSlide *changed the chat room name to* **Its Illegal for Heroes to Look This Good**

electricSlide: heyooo! wat was everyone's 1st day like

electricSlide: nd who r u with?? i only kno kiri's internship agency

electricSlide: im with enchanting hero Desiree :)

fLEX tAPE: bro, I told you I'm with Mr. Brave.

electricSlide: riiiiight forgot

school of rock: I'm with the chivalrous hero, Fourth Kind! He's really strict but really manly. And you'll never guess who's here with me…

school of rock *sent a picture to the chat*

fLEX tAPE: hey, it's your 1-B clone

school of rock: Tetsutetsu. He's a fun guy when you get to know him!

Dancing Queen: i'm with sting hero yellowjacket

Dancing Queen: she looooooooves my style

fLEX tAPE: I was wondering what was wrong with her, but your styles are really similar

Dancing Queen: my style is amazing u hater

school of rock: she's cool! What'd you guys do?

Dancing Queen: we went on patrol and went thru a market and there was soooo much good food omg the crepes were AMAZING and so were the donuts and the froyo ahhh i can't wait for patrol tomorrow

electricSlide: all u did was eat

Dancing Queen: i ate for the sake of justice

Dancing Queen: stop attacking me

Dancing Queen: wat did u even do kami

electricSlide: helped stop a robber like a real hero! nd Desiree praised meeee! her whole agency is in love with me bc im awesome 8^)

school of rock: ***@Roast Me Harder*** ! What'd you do today?

fLEX tAPE: lmao, Kirishima, he's not going to answer

electricSlide: dude give up already. he totally hates us

Dancing Queen: he's prolly all tuckered out in bed like the good little schoolboy he is. u see how diligent he is in class?? imma swipe his notes 1 day

Roast Me Harder: Fuck you.

electricSlide: OH SHIT

Dancing Queen: HE LIVES

electricSlide: HES ALIIIIIIVEEEE

fLEX tAPE: insult him and he appears. good to know >:^)

electricSlide: shut up sero or he'll show up nd stab u in ur sleep

fLEX tAPE: I'd like to see him try

Roast Me Harder: All right.

fLEX tAPE: wait, no

fLEX tAPE: Bakugou, I'm joking

school of rock: Where even are you Bakugou?

Roast Me Harder: Tokyo.

Dancing Queen: u better give us more than that

electricSlide: duuuuude u never talk to us. come oon

Roast Me Harder: Genius Office.

fLEX tAPE: are you kidding me

fLEX tAPE: how tf

Dancing Queen: if i tell you my pants size can u get me Jeanist boot cut jeans

Dancing Queen: plz

electricSlide: WAIT GENIUS OFFICE LIKE #4 HERO BEST JEANIST'S OFFICE

school of rock: Awesome! What's he like?

Roast Me Harder: A proper asshole.

school of rock: That's rough. Fourth Kind is intense too… but I'm learning!

Roast Me Harder: I didn't say I was learning. I said he was an asshole.

Dancing Queen: bakugou get me jeans plz

Dancing Queen: i am super serious right now. bakubabe i will spam ur notifications

Roast Me Harder: Don't. I'll see what I can do, Ashido.

Dancing Queen: yaaaaaay :))))

._._. **Internship Day 2** ._._.

"Oh! There he is," one of Best Jeanist's sidekicks remarks as Katsuki emerges from his room in the early morning.

"Good morning, Bakugou," they say in such perfect unison, it is unnerving.

Katsuki blearily looks at the three sidekicks eating breakfast together at one of the long tables in the commons area. He rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands, trying to massage away the heaviness a long rest assaults him with.

The grinning faces around the table irritate his morning mood, so he trudges to the bathroom and ignores their prodding eyes. They do not whisper as quietly as they think.

"He's slouching again. Best Jeanist isn't going to like that."

"He forgot his manners too."

“I can’t believe Best Jeanist let him stay with that hair. It’s so wild.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you today, huh, Blazer?”

“I’m *not* dealing with that.”

The bathroom door slams behind him, cutting off the rest of their conversation. He did not think about having to share a space with other people. Yes, Katsuki lives with his parents, but he usually wakes up earlier than the both of them, giving him at least an hour in the mornings to himself. That hour is a crucial step in waking up on the right side of the bed. And it contains no unnecessary yapping from extras.

And yet, he realizes how much of an influence Best Jeanist had on his early morning schedule since everyone in this building is already up and about at five in the morning.

By the time Katsuki finishes getting ready and eating breakfast, the sidekicks have disappeared from the commons area except for one. That Blazer guy, he assumes.

“Best Jeanist is quite busy today, so he tasked me, his *best* sidekick, with teaching you the ways of a proper hero,” Blazer explains, smoothing his blonde hair to the side and fixing the blue bandana around his neck. “I’m sure you came here looking for a fight, but not everything a proper hero does is fighting treacherous villains. Sometimes, it’s desk work. Sometimes it’s organizing information for our boss. That’s what you’re going to do today.”

Katsuki takes in the proud stance of this man. The puff of his chest. It is cute how he tries to assert his authority. Look how happy he is with himself for using those flowery words to say that he has no idea how to take an intern under his wing. Or how to handle Katsuki.

Katsuki smiles.

Blazer takes a step back.

Katsuki can only imagine how unnerving the quirk of his mouth can look when it clashes with the intensity of his eyes. He shrugs. “I don’t hold anything against Jeanist being busy. I was told before this internship started that this could happen. But you’re a different story,” Katsuki says, walking up to the startled extra until they are face-to-face. His voice rumbles in his throat. “*You* don’t get to bullshit me and tell me it’s for my own good.”

Blazer stammers over his response as if trying to calm a rabid dog. A so-called pro sweating bullets because of a sixteen-year-old intern.

“Uh, I wasn’t—”

“You weren’t *dealing with that*, right?”

“T-that’s not what—what I actually meant was—”

“Quit bumbling. I’m fucking with you, Mr. Best Sidekick,” Katsuki says, a litheness to his voice. Besides, he would rather have desk duty than have to listen to this guy drone on about being a proper hero. He pats the top of Blazer’s head patronizingly, his lip curling in disgust at the feeling of gel on his fingers. “I’ll do your grunt work, but I want to watch the press conference while I’m at it.”

“Of course, not a problem! Follow me. You can use my computer and account in the lab,” Blazer replies, quickly heading for the elevator.

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Blazer is the sidekick helping Best Jeanist with the human trafficking investigation.

It takes Katsuki a moment to realize the data he entered were the concentrations and possible locations of the contaminants in the samples swabbed from the bottom of each of the five victims’ shoes. Unfortunately, the data is not helpful. It seems the kidnappers took great care in wiping away all evidence of any other indicators, leaving only the dirt typically found on roads.

As expected, the press conference, which was broadcasted nationally, held no real information about the investigation. It was only a means to reassure the public with a showing of capability. Katsuki has always been impressed by Best Jeanist’s ability to communicate across all types of audiences. The man is always calm and collected, regardless of the tough questions the reporters asked about the progress of the investigation.

However, the matter still stands. The investigative team is having issues moving forward.

Having finished his mindless desk duties in a couple of hours, Katsuki decides to explore the other information gathered by the team that Blazer had cataloged. He shakes his head, disappointed. Blazer really should encrypt confidential files like these. How the hell is this Best Jeanist’s best sidekick?

In addition to exploring the shoe samples, they tried to track the owner of the van through the license plate number. But that lead came to a dead end. The owner of the plate number was an average person who, after intense interrogation, was proved to have no clue what was going on. So, the traffickers are using plate numbers of random civilians to avoid suspicion on the road and divert police attention. They probably are switching license plate numbers routinely as well.

The police tried to dig up information from the captured traffickers. The first person they tried to interrogate, the driver, died during interrogation. An officer with a truth quirk attempted to pull information from him, and another quirk activated in response. It was some kind of contract-fulfilling quirk bestowed upon the man. The driver stopped breathing before he could finish a sentence. Now, the police are hesitant to interrogate the other traffickers until they figure out how to cancel this contract-fulfilling quirk.

Lastly, the victims have limited information on what happened to them. Thankfully, it seems Katsuki stopped the transit to a more permanent confinement facility. The young women remembered exactly what they were doing before they were kidnapped. The tabby cat woman was purchasing a gift for her mother’s birthday. The cobra woman was exercising at a yoga class. The husky woman was out for lunch. They were out during the day in well-populated areas, attending to errands and activities they had done several times before.

And each of them vaguely recalled being pulled away as if in a dream state. Suddenly, the husky woman was sitting on an open bagel instead of a café chair. As if beckoning her, she stumbled after the walking coffee cup through the only exit of the bread castle. She went on a whole adventure with a coffee cup before waking up in the dark van. The women all remembered different but strange dreams. However, the cobra woman said she felt like she was in a state of limbo before she opened her eyes in the van. She thought she heard children laughing and a party jingle for a moment. She cannot recall the exact jingle.

The koala bear man was an exception. A mistake, it seems. He was walking home from work when the van pulled up on him and captured him. Katsuki is not sure what the kidnappers were thinking when they decided to take this man in a completely different fashion from the rest. Do they have a quota of people they need to meet? Are they paid per person, and therefore, saw an opportunity for higher pay? Are koala bears or young men highly desired in their trade? He is not sure, but that screw up is what revealed this new human trafficking ring to the world.

And then there is the little fox boy.

Based on the missing persons' files, he disappeared the longest out of the five victims. The police brought in a specialist to talk to each of the victims, but they could not get any information out of the little boy. Based on the specialist's notes, the boy—Daisuke Koryo—refuses to speak to anyone other than his parents. He clams up around other people and may begin to hyperventilate. It became such an issue that his mother took him out of school and started homeschooling him. The police spoke with the parents instead, but everything they had to provide was in the initial missing person's report. Daisuke disappeared from the neighborhood playground during a playdate with a friend. He was on the swings, and then he was not. His friend, who does not have physical animalistic features, was unharmed and had no clue where Daisuke went.

Katsuki sits back in the office chair.

No matter how poor of a writer Blazer is, there is still a lot of good information here. More than what Best Jeanist will ever tell him. And the key to this investigation is obviously the little fox boy, Daisuke. From the musings of the cobra woman to the conclusion the victims were being transported to a final confinement facility, there is definitely a temporary holding area in Musutafu. Each of the victims, except for the koala bear man, had to be taken to one. Katsuki cannot rule out the possibility for more than one area.

And based on the cobra woman's comments again, it seems this temporary area is hidden in plain sight. To hear the sounds of children laughing? A party jingle playing? None of it was related to the dream she had beforehand, which was a trail walk with a toned cobra woman. Some children's store is the front for this temporary holding area. Unfortunately, that could be anywhere in Musutafu. And Katsuki does not even know how many businesses geared towards children cover the Musutafu prefecture. It could be related to entertainment, commodity, food—fuck.

These human traffickers, even with the screw up of one of their transporting crews, know how to keep their operation airtight. Though, Katsuki is confused as to why they chose a children's store as their store front.

Fortunately, he still has some ideas. But, most importantly, he needs to talk to that kid, Daisuke Koryo, and his parents. Tonight.

He is on this case whether Best Jeanist wants him to or not.

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"Where are you going?" Blazer asks him as Katsuki heads for the front doors.

Katsuki gestures to his workout clothes, a small backpack slung over his shoulder. "To work out, obviously."

"It's quite late."

“It’s seven PM. You do realize it’s common to exercise at night,” he says, crossing his arms. He cannot visit the Koryo’s in the dead of the night as he normally ventures out as a vigilante. It is possible they will not answer the door, or they may not let him speak to Daisuke. Katsuki frowns, regardless of the time of day, they may not speak to him at all. But it is worth a shot.

“You’ve got your keycard, right? You’ll need it to get back in the agency. Door’s lock at nine,” Blazer informs him.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Katsuki says over his shoulder as he walks out the doors.

Katsuki trains hops until he can run the rest of the way to the Koryo residence, changing into his vigilante costume along the way. The family of three lives in a skinny house smooshed between others in a quiet neighborhood. The streets and sidewalks are faintly lit, giving Katsuki enough cover to slink about undetected.

However, he cannot break into this house. He wants the Koryos to trust him and honestly answer his questions. And it looks as if someone is awake. A couple of lights are still on.

He knocks on the door.

It takes a moment for anyone to answer, but Mrs. Koryo finally opens the door in a pink and white striped half apron and a matching headband pushing her short, black hair back. There is a bit of chocolate smeared on her apron.

“I’m sorry for the wait, it is quite late, you know—” Mrs. Koryo gasps as she finally looks at the person standing in front of her door. A look of fear flashes across her face as she stumbles backwards. “A r-robber!”

“I’m not a robber, ma’am,” Katsuki reassures her. Maybe he should upgrade this costume to something less sketchy. “I’m just a harmless guy.”

She covers her mouth as red tints her pale cheeks and realization sparks in her eyes.

“Oh, goodness, no you’re not—I just didn’t realize—I mean, you can see how I would make such a mistake… I just… Why is Ground Zero here?”

“Honey, who is at the door—*a robber!*” Mr. Koryo exclaims. His bushy fox tail shoots straight into the air, and he stands in front of his wife immediately, canines bearing.

Katsuki pinches the bridge of his nose.

Mrs. Koryo swats at the man’s shoulder.

“No, honey! That’s Ground Zero. And the man who saved our child is certainly welcome in our home. Please, come in.”

“Thanks.”

They settle in the living room around the glass coffee table as Mrs. Koryo brings out snacks and hot chocolate with heaping amounts of marshmallows and whipped cream. Katsuki stares at the steaming mug in front of him.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I can’t drink this,” he says, hoping that did not sound too harsh. The hot chocolate does smell amazing though.

“Oh, silly me, you’re not taking that face mask off,” Mrs. Koryo says at the same time Mr. Koryo says, “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“Don’t tease him! I’m sorry about my husband, he gets a little loopy by the end of the day,” Mrs. Koryo apologizes, sitting down on her knees. “But, really, what are you doing here?”

Katsuki folds his hands together on the coffee table. “I’d like to ask you a few questions about the kidnapping if that is all right with you. Anything you or your son can recall.”

The Koryos look at each other. And the wife retells everything she remembers of the day Daisuke disappeared her eyes reddening as she tries to keep the tears back.

“I was right there the whole time, chatting with Mrs. Uta on the benches. I looked away for just a minute, and when I looked back, he was gone. My baby was gone,” she says in a quivering voice. Mr. Koryo covers her hands with his, rubbing his thumb over her skin in soothing motions. “He was gone for two days. And I couldn’t sleep or eat because I didn’t know if my baby had the same luxuries.”

“We have no clue what he saw,” the husband begins. “All I know is it wasn’t what everyone else saw.”

Katsuki raises his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Koryo’s white tail swishes nervously. His ears twitch. “This quirk of mine is a little more special than a simple fox quirk. My son and I are closer to that of a kitsune than that of a fox.”

He takes a sip of his hot chocolate, licking the whipped cream out of his fur. “The quirk looks the same on the outside. We both look like foxes. However, it is a game of chance on what kind of kitsune power manifests. I can call upon a fox fire. My son manipulates dreams and illusions. So, I… I am quite sure he did not enter the same dream state the other victims entered. At least, not for long.”

“But he won’t talk to us about it,” Mrs. Koryo adds, in a quiet voice. “Daisuke saw something no child should ever have to, and I’ve no clue what it is or how to make it go away.”

“Mommy?”

All of them turn to the sound of a child’s voice. Daisuke stands by the staircase, rubbing one of his eyes with his balled up fist. His pointy ears mold the shape of the black hoodie pulled over his head. It looks like he woke up from the sounds of their voices. He must have sensitive ears.

Mrs. Koryo gets up and kneels in front of her son, pulling him into her arms. “Did we wake you, dear?” she asks. But her question falls deaf on his ears as he notices Katsuki sitting in their living room. His claws sink into her apron.

“Mom! That’s—Mom! That’s,” Daisuke stammers, his words failing him. “That’s Ground Zero!”

The boy dashes towards him, but before he can bulldoze through Katsuki’s stomach, he stops. He hesitates, his hands bunching in his own hoodie. That hesitation hurts. The slight skepticism in his

watchful eyes hurts.

"Nothing you do will go unnoticed. How you act, how you present yourself, is important to gain the trust of the people… It is difficult to save someone who is scared of you or holds certain biases against you."

Yes, Katsuki may have saved this boy, pulled him from a nightmare that lasted two whole days, but he also left him on the street. Ran away when the boy clearly did not want to let Katsuki go. Admiration and gratefulness do not correct the distrust that may have wormed its way into his mind. He sighs, but waves at the little boy.

"That's a cool hoodie you got there, Daisuke," Katsuki says. The little boy perks up at his words, swaying in his spot and digging his toe into the carpet.

"Mommy got it for me," Daisuke says, excitedly looking at his mother.

Mrs. Koryo smiles. "He sleeps better with it on," she mouths to him, hoping her son does not hear.

"Is that so?" Katsuki hums, digging through his small backpack. He pulls out a spare face mask. "But you're missing something, don't you think?"

The boy blinks rapidly for a moment as if processing his words is a great task. He steps a bit closer. "I can have your mask?"

Katsuki holds it out. "Sure. Might be a bit big for you, but that's all right."

Daisuke closes the few feet between them, snatching the face mask and staring at it like it was the epitome of Christmas. With a little difficulty, he pulls the mask over his snout and looks to Katsuki expectantly.

"Wow, it's the real hero of the night."

Daisuke giggles and plops down right in front of Katsuki. "I didn't do nothing…"

Katsuki fakes surprise, placing his hands on his hips. "You're kidding me. Who is the one in this room who found his parents again? Who stayed strong through it all?" Katsuki says. He swallows. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

Daisuke shakes his head desperately. He hugs his knees, his mouth screwing into a frown.

"Okay, that's fine. We don't have to."

After a beat of silence. Daisuke perks up again. "Can I show you my planes?"

"Your planes?"

Daisuke scrambles up, a smile wiping away his desperation to stay quiet. "I've got a bunch of planes! Come on, let's go!" he says, grabbing Katsuki's hand and tugging him to the staircase.

"Uh," Katsuki says unintelligently, nervously looking to his parents for help. They glance at each other, amused at the scene.

“Don’t worry, I’ll come too,” Mrs. Koryo says, and she follows them up the stairs. *Ma’am.* He is not looking for a green light.

They sit on floor of Daisuke’s room for hours. The little boy runs and grabs every toy airplane he owns. And he owns *a lot*. Jets, turboprops, fighter planes, cargo planes, aerobatics—too many. He had a whole description for every single airplane. The company, the model, the year made, and any cool history facts or flights that plane ever flew. And when he did not know a fact, he made it up. Like the amphibious aircraft that can shoot snakes with glue guns.

Katsuki wonders if the kid is trying to get out all the words he bottled up when he stopped talking to anyone besides his parents. Stopped talking to his friends or leaving the house. Katsuki feels a bit special, listening to him ramble on about planes.

“And this one,” Daisuke starts, looking at the old, grey airplane. “This is a 1937 bomber plane…”

He looks at the plane in his hands silently for so long, Katsuki glances at his mother if something happened. He was talking so animatedly just a moment ago. She opens her mouth to say something, but Daisuke beats her to the punch.

“But it doesn’t drop bombs, it drops a song. The song doesn’t hurt everyone. Only people like me. Because I couldn’t have fun like everyone else who sung it and laughed and got toys. I could only listen through a wall and watch more people like me get hurt too.” His voice is suddenly distant as he speaks. And Katsuki understands immediately. He keeps his voice level.

“Oh? That’s an interesting plane. I wonder how they figured out how to drop a song. What does the song sound like?”

The boy starts to hum to himself before he begins to sing the little jingle the cobra lady possibly heard in her dazed state. If the police play the jingle for her, she may be able to confirm it.

The Build-a-Beaver Workshop jingle.

It is a toy franchise in Japan that makes themed stuffed beaver dolls. Katsuki knows because he begged his father for a limited edition All Might Beaver when he was a child. They have since branched out to other types of animals.

The toy shop or shops could be fronts for the human trafficking operation. The temporary holding areas for victims before they are transported to a more permanent facility.

Daisuke drops the warplane on the ground. “I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Okay, sweetie. It’s pretty late, so why don’t you say goodbye to Ground Zero, okay?” Mrs. Koryo says, petting the top of the boys head. He clings to her leg.

“Ground Zero can’t stay?” he asks, his voice muffled a bit by the fabric of his mother’s pants.

“He has to get back to saving people, isn’t that right?”

“Right, but it was great to see you again.” Katsuki reaches out to ruffle the top of the kid’s head, but he gets a tight hug instead.

“Will you come back?”

“Of course, kid.”

._._. **Internship Day 3** – Tsunagu’s POV ._._.

Tsunagu sips his morning coffee to wake him for the day. Today is the last day of Bakugou’s internship at his agency. He is regretful he could not teach the boy yesterday. The press conference, although broadcasted on television, was closed to only a select few reporters and certain members of the investigative team. It would have been a great opportunity to show Bakugou another instance of why growing out of his childish attitude is important to be a proper hero. Thankfully, Blazer informed him that Bakugou watched the event on a livestream.

After the press conference, the investigative team held a recap meeting to go over the information they had. They plan to pull in another expert, a better analyst than the one they have to get some fresh eyes on the case.

Then, he had to attend another set of closed meetings related to an entirely different case with the Shizuoka Police Department.

And before he knew it, he was pulled into a villain attack on the way back to the agency.

Tsunagu wanted to check in with Bakugou at the end of the day, but by the time he returned to the agency, the boy had stepped out for some night exercise.

Tsunagu arrives at his private office, setting down the pile of mail Ryoko provided him along with his coffee order. He will begin his lessons with Bakugou at seven AM, so he has enough time to read through his messages, mail and email, as well as put the final touches on today’s lecture.

From Blazer’s notes, the boy had *quite* the attitude yesterday. Perhaps he thought, without Tsunagu around, he had free reign to speak as he pleased? They will sort that nonsense out today.

Although, except for the brush, Bakugou has not been unreasonable since he started. He was receptive to their talks during the patrol. He engaged in the hero branding activities even though it was clear the boy wanted nothing to do with the final product. He seems to try even if it goes against his own opinions. Maybe he deserves a little more than lectures and patrols?

Tsunagu ponders this as he reads through his mail. There are several invitations to fashion shows, talk show segments, hero banquets, and other public relation events. As a proper hero, he will attend every one of them. Exposure is important. He sifts through some other mail. Bills from the hero insurance company. The latest magazine issue of *Heroes InStyle* with his posed figure plastered on the front.

However, under it all lies a manila envelope with a sticky note attached to the front.

“I have taken the liberty of speaking with Daisuke Koryo, the youngest kidnapped victim. I heard you were having some trouble getting through to him, understandably so. He has shed some light on a children’s franchise acting as a front for the human trafficking operation.

–Signed, The Fake Hero”

He rips open the envelope.

Inside, there is a typed report, a map with clusters of red dots, and a list of locations. The report talks about Ground Zero's suspicions of the Build-A-Beaver Workshop franchise in Musutafu and how it may be a front for the trafficking of humans with animalistic quirks. He goes in detail of why he ranked the list of eight workshop locations from highest to lowest possibility of being a temporary holding area for victims. He then ties up the report with a map of the last known locations of missing persons with animalistic quirks in the past few months. The clusters either surround or sit close to the Build-A-Beaver Workshop locations. He recommends playing the franchise's jingle to the cobra-like woman to see if it jogs her memory. Lastly, he advocates the need for an infiltration or sting operation at these locations.

It is quite impressive. Tsunagu would not have guessed a mere vigilante crafted this report. He needs to call another meeting with the investigation team. At the very least, they should check this vigilante's work and make sure it is valid. But this could be the push they needed to progress this case and catch these criminals.

He sighs. This vigilante is also quite up to date with any details on this investigation. It is uncanny how quickly he learned of Tsunagu's remarks to Mr. Watanabe the other day.

The door to his office opens.

"Heard you caught a villain yesterday," Katsuki says, frowning. "Must be nice."

Tsunagu's eyes crinkle at the corners. Is he pouting? He walks into his superior's office without knocking. He does not greet him before speaking. And he pouts when he does not get what he wants. It is so amusing how vastly different this intern is from any other intern he ever had. He always sponsors students who are proper, sophisticated, well-mannered. He is sure if Bakugou was given the opportunity, his misuse of the Japanese language would be worse than what he has shown already.

"Good morning to you too, Bakugou. Please do not forget your manners when you address another," he chastises. "You're early again."

"I thought you said this was on time."

"Yes, you are right," Tsunagu affirms, a smile hidden behind the collar of his denim dress shirt. "I also did apprehend a villain yesterday afternoon. *I* heard you were less than pleasant with my sidekick."

"I was the correct amount of pleasant with that sideshow," Bakugou mumbles, looking off to the side. "What're we doing today?"

"I believe we will have another chat about your attitude," he starts. Bakugou groans and tilts his head backwards. "You did not let me finish. We will have another chat, and then you will join me in a meeting with the Musutafu Police, concerning the human trafficking investigation. We have received some new information that may advance our progress."

His intern looks taken aback. And yet, he seems just a bit smug. "Wait, I thought I wasn't allowed near this case."

“I believe this can be a great learning experience. You have seen how a proper hero speaks to a civilian, to an interviewer, to a room of reporters—I think another important collaborative lesson would be how a hero engages and works with the local police. As long as you can be civil—”

“I can do that,” Bakugou says quickly.

“And do not *interrupt* anyone,” Tsunagu says with a look. “I will convince the team to allow you to sit in on the meeting.”

“Sweet.”

“But first, we need to talk about your actions yesterday.”

Bakugou groans.

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** ._._.

Katsuki squats on the edge of the rooftop. He does not need to be out here at night. It would probably be better if he stayed inside the agency. But he is too restless from today’s personal victory to sit still.

The investigative team plans to move forward with his suggestion on infiltrating the Build-A-Beaver Workshops. Katsuki managed to keep his comments to himself, but he could not stop the smirk that sat on his face. It sucks that Best Jeanist does not know it was his idea, but he is still glad the investigation is not so stuck anymore.

“The famed Ground Zero *does* love ledges.”

Katsuki stiffens at the voice that catches him off guard. This is why he should have stayed in the damn agency.

This voice is not familiar; it does not match any of the heroes he knows. He whips around, ready to run if need be. But he freezes in his tracks.

Not a hero.

A hero killer.

Chapter End Notes

Katsuki: Finally, you got it. Is it gonna be this bad with your next quirk?
Midoriya: My next what
Katsuki: What

Note A: I am unsure if the Yuuei students commute back and forth, but I’ve decided that they all stay in the areas they intern for the week. Either at the agencies or at hotels/lodging in the area.

Note B: Don’t mind me fiddling with the total number of chapters of this fic lol. It will probably stay between 35 and 50 chapters, but nothing is set in stone until I start writing and posting the last section.

Mad as a hatter with a dagger and a dollar sign

Chapter Notes

> Last time, Katsuki spent the first half of his field internship with Best Jeanist, helping further a human trafficking investigation in the meantime. An uncanny opponent approaches him.
>
> Part three out of four* of the field internship arc. Song title is from “Leave Me Alone” by I Don’t Know How But They Found Me.
>
> *Tentative Chapter 14 Post Date: July 31, 2021*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Internship Day 3** – Night ._._.

“The famed Ground Zero *does* love ledges.”

Katsuki stiffens at the voice that catches him off guard. This is why he should have stayed in the damn agency.

This voice is not familiar; it does not match any of the heroes he knows. He whips around, ready to run if need be. But he freezes in his tracks.

Not a hero.

A hero killer.

Stain stands hunched in the middle of the rooftop, half shrouded in complete darkness from the rooftop access door, half dimly illuminated by the moon. Ragged scarves of off-white and red wave lightly in the wind. Matted black hair sits petrified atop his head. Several knives are holstered to his person, and a sword is secured behind his back.

His nose-less face is as creepy as Katsuki remembers.

Katsuki stays crouched in a defensive position. He cannot say he expected to be hunted by a hero killer, especially when he is not acting as a licensed hero. Last time he checked, Stain was skulking around Hosu City, which is where he injured Ingenium.

What is he doing on this side of Tokyo? Is he moving on now? That does not track with his previous patterns; not from what Katsuki read in Genius’ extensive case archives. He tended to stay in one area until he injured four or more pro heroes.

He cracks his knuckles. Crossing paths with a serial killer is not on his to-do list; however, he can make an exception today.

“A man, no,” Stain pauses, “A boy of two names it seems.”

Katsuki stills, his heart sinking to his stomach with a painful heaviness.

“Come again?” he says, breathless to find his voice.

Stain hangs back on his heels.

“As Ground Zero, you created a following of people who put more trust in the acts of a vigilante than those of a so-called hero. And you instill jealousy in the hearts of scum with no right to be called heroes. Scum who only fight for fame and material possessions,” he says indifferently, as if stating facts. Instantly, his face twists with such disgust, his voice filling with vitriol. Goosebumps prickle the skin of Katsuki’s arms. “But then you waste your potential as a mere student to these cancers of society. Why do you conform to these crooked heroes?”

Katsuki breathes deeply through his nose, barely moving a muscle as the hero killer watches him.

Stain *cannot* possibly know his identity.

“You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m not who you think I am,” he says, his words come out threatening but unsure.

“Katsuki Bakugou. Sixteen years old. First year student at Yuuei High School,” Stain says, the corners of his lips curl like a Cheshire cat when Katsuki’s shoulders betray him with a miniscule flinch. He raises his arms in a grand gesture, his fingers curved like claws. “Like someone did for me, I’ve come to liberate you of your mask. Your veil as a fake hero before it is too late. Before they infect you.”

Fuck. Of course, the madman discovers his identity.

Katsuki swallows against a dry throat.

“I’m not the only one here with many names, *Akaguro*. I know who you are—”

“—Who I *was*,” Stain interrupts, dropping his arms. “Who I left behind. Chizome. Stendhal. Names of masks that are no more. And soon, ‘Katsuki’ will be no more as well.”

“The fuck does that mean, you piece of shit.” Katsuki jumps down from the raised ledge of the roof. He flexes his hands before forming fists. And Stain’s hands hover over the knives in his shoulder holster. “You aren’t *liberating* me of anything. It was stupid to entertain your damn yapping in the first place.”

Stain drops the grin, but his voice is filled with it, mocking Katsuki.

“You’re lashing out because my words ring true. We’re both forging the path of righteousness in this crooked society. You save the innocents that those societal cancers are too lazy to care about. And I cull those cancers from this world. We share the same ambition.”

Katsuki’s upper lip twists in disgust. “We are *not* the same. Let me show you how as I bash in your skull.”

“Wh-what’s going on up here? This is a restricted rooftop…” the voice trails off, and Katsuki turns to find a flashy-looking guy shakily climbing up from the fire escape. The guy stiffens at the edge of the roof when he realizes who he is addressing. “Oh *god*, the hero killer! And… Ground Zero?”

Katsuki can smell the newness of this hero from a mile away. He is decked out in yellow and red spandex and a bulky helmet. He points an accusing finger at the two of them. “I-I am here now, and I’m taking you both in! All will know the name of the fireworks hero, ‘Firecracker!’ ”

He hears Stain scoff, disgust dripping from his words.

“Another false hero.”

Katsuki sprints before Stain grabs his knife. He seizes the hero’s arm immediately, yanking him out of his stupor before the hurled knife can impale his throat. The hero trips to the ground, and Katsuki stands in front of him.

Stain is before him in an instant. Katsuki throws a straight jab, narrowly missing as the hero killer sidesteps. He slices at him with a new knife. Katsuki dodges and spins, using the momentum to throw a roundhouse kick. Stain ducks.

They fall into a dance of sort. Dodging and weaving through knives, punches, and kicks. Katsuki cannot land a hit on this bastard. He needs to focus on not getting cut over landing a hit, and it takes a toll on his ability to strike. The last thing he wants is to get stabbed the night before his internship with Miruko.

Three resounding blasts boom in the air from behind Katsuki, and he barely misses the knife to his face as the sounds break his concentration. Fireworks light up the sky above them. They spell, “SOS.”

“Roaches always try to huddle together,” Stain says. He swipes Katsuki’s feet out from under him and dashes for the hero.

Katsuki rolls to his feet and runs for Stain, watching the man unsheathe his katana. He dives forward, colliding with Stain’s back and forcing him to lose his balance. Firecracker scrambles backwards as the two of them crash in front of the hero. An elbow slams into Katsuki’s right temple, and he loses his hold on Stain, his body tossed to the ground.

Police sirens wail in the distance.

By the time he scrambles to his feet, Katsuki scans the area for the hero killer through slightly blurry eyes. He is gone.

Shit.

Losing sight of the villain who knows his identity was not the plan. Nor was protecting a newborn hero. He groans, rubbing a hand over his eyes, before facing the jittery hero.

“Are you okay?” Katsuki asks, resigned. Firecracker snaps his head in his direction.

“Wh-what?”

“I asked you if you’re fine.”

“Y-yes!”

“Okay, stay put. Your little light show did the trick,” Katsuki says, watching the police cars pull up to the building, officers scrambling from their cars. He turns to leave, but stops. “Look. It’s okay to

get scared or nervous, but if you freeze up like that every time you encounter a villain, maybe consider a career change."

·_·_·

(Flashback: Year 2034)

"Kacchan, please stop bouncing your leg. It's shaking the table."

"Shut up. I don't want to be here, and I'm making it everyone's problem."

The Genius Office public relations department was heckling him to attend at least one event this season to boost his visibility, and Katsuki refused every single time. Why would he do that? Just send Best Jeanist like always.

He never cared for the entertainment part of being a pro hero, and he never will. It took Best Jeanist years to understand that, but he accepted it and started to take Katsuki's place at these events. They worked out a great system. Best Jeanist smooths out the agency's public image, and Katsuki does his damn job.

His outright refusals were working too. The public relations department is pretty intimidated by him, so they are not going to force him to do anything. But he did not expect them to send the final boss.

Camie.

It felt like all the witch did was open her mouth, and, suddenly, he was sitting at a fancy table next to Eijirou with a black and burgundy tuxedo fitted to his body.

Izuku shoots an apologetic smile to their fourth guest at the table. He frowns at him. "Look, I'm bored too, but you don't see me throwing a tantrum about it."

Katsuki's head jerks back as if he were burned.

"Bitch? What'd you say?"

"You heard me."

"All right, guys," Eijirou says with a nervous chuckle. He places a supportive hand on Katsuki's shoulder. "Why don't we just calm down? They're going to start any minute now."

Katsuki rolls his eyes, but he sits back in his chair. He does not fail to catch the pensive look on Izuku's face, and how it morphs into a mischievous smirk for a split second.

Izuku scoffs.

"Typical. Throw it in my face why don't you."

Eijirou has a funny little smile on his lips, his head tilting to the side.

"What are you talking about, Midoriya?" he asks.

But Katsuki understands, and he has to swallow his smile down. Izuku may be a public sweetheart, but he is a menace behind the scenes. And he is giving Katsuki an out in the most dramatic way possible.

All right. Katsuki does not mind playing the bad guy if it benefits him getting the fuck out of here. Best Jeanist may murder him, but the agency will never ask Katsuki to attend another public event again.

He snatches Eijirou's hand off of his shoulder, pulling it into his chest with the most affection anyone has ever seen from the man.

"Are we really doing this here? Who's throwing the tantrum now?" he retorts, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, so you're not denying it this time."

"Don't put this all on me, you betrayed me first."

Izuku's eyes widen, and he laughs humorlessly.

"Betrayed—when did I ever? I was loyal. I was the only one who was loyal."

"Right up until I found you with them."

The random fourth guest at their table shrinks in her seat, her eyes bolting between them as she takes a shaky sip of her wine. Katsuki cannot tell if she is scared or unable to contain herself.

Izuku abruptly stands, his chair skirting against the glossy hardwood floor. Their table slowly grabs everyone's attention as the grand hall falls silent.

"I had no choice. And did you forget? You betrayed me first," he shouts, walking around the table in long strides until he is towering over the two of them. "Sure, you didn't outright cheat on me, but I was never your first choice. It was always him. You didn't cheat, but you're still a traitor."

There is a shine to his eyes, a heaviness to his breathing, and Katsuki cannot believe the acting on this little shit. How dare he think he can out-act the king?

Eijirou's eyes are popping out of their sockets, his mouth gaping like a fish.

"Wha?" he asks, nervously. Katsuki shushes him.

He releases Eijirou's hand, kicking his chair back and invading Izuku's personal space. Faux rage seeps from his eyes, and he grits his teeth.

"Fuck you. I don't have to listen to your bullshit lies when you're no better than me," he spits, shoving Izuku to the side with his shoulder as he storms to the exit.

To freedom.

"Yeah, walk away! Just like before," Izuku calls after him out of desperation.

Katsuki snorts unintentionally, and he coughs to cover it up. He flips the bird over his shoulder. Faintly, he hears Shouto betting the tabloids will blame him for this with Mina. He punches the exit doors open for added flare.

"Uh," the keynote speaker awkwardly stutters into the microphone, snatching everyone's attention from the slamming doors. "W-welcome to the 96th Annual Hero Gala…"

Not even ten minutes into his night patrol, Best Jeanist calls him.

"What did you do."

"I am highly offended by that accusation."

"Katsuki!"

Japan experiences the five stages of grief when they see their favorite wonder duo amicably eating lunch together after the blindsiding and confusing scandal at the annual hero gala. Eijirou refuses to be around either of them for a week.

._._. **Internship Day 4** – Thursday ._._.

After packing his suitcases, Best Jeanist takes Katsuki out for breakfast, mainly to review the lessons he learned these past three days. Still, it is a kind gesture, especially since he knows this is the man's favorite breakfast spot. But Katsuki cannot help but scowl over his tonjiru, his thoughts drifting to last night.

He had a difficult time trying to sleep after slipping away from the scene, tossing and turning the few hours he had to rest. Too many questions buzz through his mind. Most importantly, how did Stain find out? When did Stain figure out his identity? Did he stalk him? Follow him home to where his parents sleep, unbeknownst of a murderer skulking their windows? Did he follow him to school where his teenage classmates learn in a bubble of supposed safety? The thought of someone tailing Katsuki, encroaching on his life, while he is none the wiser makes his skin itch. If a serial killer can, what is stopping someone far more sinister from doing the same?

Why does Stain care?

Stain made grand statements about how Katsuki influenced the public and intimidated pro heroes as a vigilante. But he is not the only vigilante in Japan, let alone the city of Musutafu. Granted, Katsuki has not run into another vigilante, but he knows he is not the only one. Plus, not all vigilantes operate in the dead of night. Why take any interest in him? He knows he has some sort of internet fanbase. He checked Heroddit a few times before and found several threads of posts about him under a "GZ" tag. However, Stain is not driven by popularity or fame, so some small fanbase cannot be the reason this man sought him out.

Like someone did for me, I've come to liberate you of your mask. Your veil as a fake hero before it is too late. Before they infect you.

To liberate him of his mask. To liberate him of "Katsuki." How ridiculous. To be what exactly? A vigilante with a name he never claimed? He still has not fully grasped what the hero killer meant by forgoing himself. He cannot get rid of himself.

Katsuki stills, his spoon drops into his soup.

Did he not forgo a part of his self when he refused to claim his old hero codename? At least when he is shrouded in a hoodie and face mask, saving those who fall under the radar but within his reach, he can pretend he is not a 31-year-old stuck in the body of a 16-year-old. He can pretend he is not an ex-pro hero who turns to vigilantism to feel like a pro hero again. To grasp at the leftover remnants of his life that ground him.

We are both forging the path of righteousness in this crooked society. You save the innocents that those societal cancers are too lazy to care about. And I cull those cancers from this world. We share the same ambition.

No, they do not. It is insulting Stain could ever think such a thought. He stares a hole into his soup, his eyes narrowing at the settling liquid.

He did not sign up for this bullshit when he started beating up assholes at night.

“Bakugou?”

Katsuki snaps his head up at the call of his name. Best Jeanist stopped talking who knows how long ago.

“What has you so far inside your head, you ignored my call three times?” his boss asks in a calm voice.

Katsuki moves to prop his elbows on the table, but decides against it, loosely folding his hands in his lap. He did not mean to ignore the man. He opens his mouth, but it takes him a moment to piece together the fragments of a question floating around his mind.

“What if someone claims to know you better than yourself? What if they think the way you live is inherently wrong, and they want to correct it through outrageous means?” he finally asks.

Best Jeanist look taken aback with the way his eyes widen just a bit, and he straightens himself in his chair.

“Have I upset you during this internship?” he answers with a question. Katsuki feels his thoughts crash to a halt as the inquiry blindsides him.

“What? No, I—” Katsuki starts, trying to bring his voice down to mind the other customers. “I wasn’t talking about you.”

Best Jeanist hums noncommittedly.

“I think it is quite impossible for someone to know you better than yourself; although, I believe people can help you understand more about yourself,” he says, looking curiously at whatever Katsuki’s face is expressing. “What exactly did this person say?”

Katsuki shakes his head.

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Bakugou.”

“I don’t know. They think I’m wearing a mask.”

“Are you?”

“*No*,” he snaps, frustration tickling the back of his neck. “I’m not. Not really. It’s… I just have more to me.”

“People aren’t static beings. We change and grow. We are flexible and malleable. We adapt to different situations and different people. You are allowed to be multifaceted, Bakugou,” his mentor says.

“Okay,” Katsuki sighs. He supposes Best Jeanist is right.

“Do you know what I thought of you when we met for the first time?” his mentor asks.

Katsuki huffs out a breath, crossing his arms.

“You’ve only said it million times. Rude. Volatile. Rough around the edges.”

Best Jeanist’s eyes crinkle, and with his long collar zipped down to eat, Katsuki can finally see his accompanying smile.

“Yes; however, this internship showed me how observant, hardworking, and respectful you are when you choose to be.” He pauses.

“You told me you think your actions speak louder than your words. And the more time I spend around you, the more I believe this notion. However, I don’t want your words to belittle your actions. As a proper hero you will stand in the spotlight constantly, and if the public fails to see the sides you’ve hidden under your harsh exterior, they will judge you wrongly. This person you are speaking of may also fail to see all of you, and, therefore, judged you wrongly. I admit I am guilty of this.”

Katsuki presses his lips together to prevent the little twitch of happiness. When he replays the past three days in his mind, and the two days he spent with his mentor, he is not quite sure what he did to win the man over. He called out his guarded responses to a reporter. He humored his romanticization of a proper hero in the conference room and listened to his lectures quietly enough. He did Blazer’s desk work better than the man himself. He managed to not make a fool of himself in the meeting with the Musutafu Police.

“I mean, you *were* kind of an asshole,” he says in a teasing voice.

“Watch your language,” Best Jeanist chastises. “Though, if we are on the topic of learning about others, would you mind telling me more about yourself?”

Katsuki makes a face.

“Why?”

“To indulge a final request from your field mentor.”

He rolls his eyes, more to buy time than out of annoyance.

“I make a mean tehri.”

Best Jeanist huffs that little half-laugh of his.

“Oh, really? I would have never known. Where did you learn to make such a dish?”

·_·_·

Katsuki leaves the Genius Office with everyone properly sending him off. He takes the taxi Best Jeanist calls to the train station. Miruko texted him the details for a hotel in the city of Yokohama. She has not divulged any other details of why she is in Yokohama, but he is sure it will be interesting.

The best course of action is to lay low and stay close to Miruko. No vigilantism for the rest of this internship. Stain is a man with an “enlightened” agenda. The hero killer cannot possibly stay interested in him. Not when his ideals are pulling him towards a grander purpose. It would be better for a “societal cancer” to apprehend him. It is a pro hero’s job after all. And if he recalls correctly from the case studies he has read, Endeavor was the hero to detain Stain. Katsuki doubts he has disturbed the timeline enough to change such an outcome.

However, before he boards the train, he calls the Tokyo Police Department, leaving an anonymous tip that he spotted Stain in central Tokyo last night. He says that, based on previous sightings and evidence, wards where the crime rate has not dropped in more than a few years may be targeted by the hero killer. Pro heroes of those areas should be on high alert. He is surprised to learn the police already knew of Stain’s appearance, but they thank him for calling anyways. Firecracker probably reported Stain to the police when they arrived.

Boarding the train, Katsuki seats himself next to an old woman, nodding his head curtly to acknowledge her existence. He angles his body towards the window to watch the blurring scenery as the train begins to move. He has about forty-five minutes to spare.

If he keeps his head down, and Endeavor does his damn job, he can enjoy fighting villains with Miruko while Stain boards his own train to Tartarus. Deciding whether a person lives or dies because they do not uphold an impossible standard of hero is heinous.

Katsuki knows there are pros who care more about fame and riches than the actual job. He knows there are heroes who will do everything in their power to increase their popularity. How does the saying go? Being an entertainer is 50% of a hero’s job?

But that does not change his stance. Besides, Stain does not care to differentiate between heroes who are corrupt and heroes who are not. To him, every hero is fake unless they are All Might. The highest standard.

If he did, Ingenium would not be in a hospital.

·_·_·

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/groundzerosnumberonefan · 5h

[**GZ**] Uhhh. We all saw the news this morning, right?

…Ground Zero’s working with the hero killer guy, Stain?? Um, what?

For everyone's reference, Firecracker was on TV earlier today, talking about how he found Ground Zero colluding with Stain last night. He tried to detain them both, and they attacked him, and he barely left with his life. The broadcast was recorded here: URL LINK.

#whatisgoingon #groundzeroisavillain #ornot #idontknow

695k upvotes · 1k comments

…

[Best Comments]

zarymary101 · 5h

I KNEW this would happen! I knew this would happen over a year ago, and you all ridiculed me! These vigilantes can't be trusted AT ALL. This is why we have laws against vigilantism in the first place! It's like we all forgot how horrible vigilantes can be when this rando showed up. Never forget Supersonic. Pixie Queen. Ratman. And the rest of those lowlifes! I can't wait for the REAL heroes to finally put this guy down.

310k upvotes · 124 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| piratebooties270 · 5h

|| *Stop fearmongering. It's not even confirmed. It's one guy screaming at a news camera about something no one else can vouch for. It's like YOU forgot what happened with The Builder and the Night Stalker. #groundzeroarmy*

|| 71k upvotes · 65 replies

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stainsocietywiththeirblood · 5h

Okay, and? Why's this bad? Stain is right. Fuck these heroes. They sit up on their high horses and forget about the little guys. My best friend was killed last month because these fucking pros couldn't be bothered to show up and do their fucking jobs. They're lazy, useless, and greedy. They need to be culled by Stain and replaced with real heroes like Ground Zero anyways. Fuck these fake heroes. Fuck this fucked up society.

102k upvotes · 124 replies

|| [Recent Replies]

|| gloobbabs · 4h

|| *You must be fun at parties.*

|| 1k upvotes · 25 replies

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dbsdbs · 4h

Ground Zero is ALLEGEDLY working with Stain. Guys, come on. Our vigilante isn't a killer. I'm going to say it again: Ground Zero isn't a killer. And can we really trust this guy, Firecracker? I've never heard of him before. Smells like another trap.

288k upvotes · 73 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| drowninginmargs · 3h

|| *Exactly. How many people has Ground Zero saved this past year? And now he's suddenly a murderer? It doesn't make sense. People are just scared. But I'm still #groundzeroarmy*

|| 87k upvotes · 15 replies

…

[New Comments]

revelryinthedark · 2m

There's no way. This is a lie spurred by propaganda, and I won't be swayed.

·_·_·

Katsuki checks into his room at the western-style hotel with the information Miruko provided him, changing into his hero uniform and knocking on Miruko's door.

"Kid! It's about time you got here," she laughs as she swings the door open. She was filling out hero incident reports on her laptop to pass the time, waiting for him to finally arrive. She slaps him on the back, and Katsuki stumbles forward a bit. "I was about to go on patrol with or without you."

Katsuki loves patrolling with Miruko the most because she understands that they both work best when they can move autonomously. When they were in Delhi together, and when Katsuki was not learning from the local heroes, she would designate a patrol route where they would split up to cover ground faster and meet up at the end to discuss what they found. For someone who travels all across Japan, being pulled only by the stench of evil, moving fast is important to her.

But Katsuki was not expecting her to designate a split patrol route the very first day of his internship. Especially not with his sixteen-year-old self.

"You patrolled with Jeanist, right? You got the gist of it?" Miruko asks him only a few blocks away from the hotel.

"I know what to keep an eye out for, if that's what you're asking," Katsuki says.

"Perfect!" she exclaims, spinning around until she stands in front of him. Her hand rests on her cocked hip. "I told you before; I don't teach. You want to learn? Then, exposure will be your teacher."

Miruko maps out a route for him to run while she takes an adjacent one. “Let’s start with this, and then we’ll meet back here in the Naka Ward,” she explains.

“And if something goes down, I’m authorized to fight?” he asks carefully.

“That’s what I said!”

“You’re sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Miruko answers, a little annoyed this time.

Katsuki shuts his mouth. Best Jeanist kept him in the kiddie pool the past three days, and Miruko kicks him into the deep end without hesitation. He is *not* complaining, but the 180-degree turn in mentorship may give him whiplash.

He will enjoy the whiplash.

This is exactly what he wanted. Being cooped up in school and surrounded by teachers his age telling him what to do all the damn time grates his nerves. He just wants the opportunity to do things his way again without hiding his quirk or operating at night.

“Just checking. This works for me,” he replies.

“Good! If you get in a bad situation, call me immediately. I’ll be right over,” she throws over her shoulder as she leaves, leaping over a two-story building in a single bound.

Katsuki stares down at his gloved hands, letting tiny explosions crackle across his palms. When was the last time he got to use his quirk outside of personal training or foundational heroics studies? The villain attack at Yuuei? Do not remind him. When he helped Midoriya test out his quirk? Does not count.

It has been too long. He deserves to go all out sometimes. And he received the greenlight to do so.

He straightens his arms, pointing his palms to the pavement, and shoots himself into the sky.

Boom.

The wind slides against his skin, whipping through his hair, as he soars upwards. Reaching the end of his jump, weightlessness tickles his heart. Good, he flew about three stories high. Angling his palms behind him, he pushes forward, using his explosions to propel him.

His eyes dart around, looking for anything out of the ordinary. People stare up at him from the ground, children pointing and tugging at their parents’ clothes. He bets they are confused. They have never seen this hero before. Katsuki follows the road from the skies, flipping his body around to turn the corner of a brick building.

A flying car meets him around the corner.

“Shit!” His reflexes outpace his mind as he vaults over the car, straddling top of the vehicle and narrowly avoiding his fate as splatter on a wall.

In the middle of the street, a hulking man covered in a stony skin lets out a guttural roar. The man has to be at least ten feet tall. His skin as grey as concrete and cracked in some areas. The remnants

of a business suit wave like rags on his arms and legs.

“How dare they fire me over email? I will *destroy* them!”

He throws a punch at the streetlight, the metal bending under the force of his punch and leaving a dented imprint of a fist.

Katsuki cackles.

No, stop enjoying this. He shakes his head. *Focus*.

He drops down on the pavement, rolling into a defensive stance. “So, you got fired,” he starts to say, grabbing the man’s attention. “I can see why. The car was overkill. I don’t think insurance will cover that.”

“A child,” the man says incredulously. “I will level this fucking block, and they send a *child*? This humiliation… makes me so… angry!”

“Cry me a river, why don’t you?” Katsuki patronizes the man. He glances around. Most of the civilians have fled from the immediate area, but some have stayed, their phones out as they record the fight. People watch from the surrounding buildings’ windows. Others huddling behind parked cars.

“Shut up, you fucking brat!” the man shrieks, and he runs towards Katsuki at full speed.

The street is pretty wide, but the last thing he wants is someone to get injured from a too large explosion. He needs to keep his attacks contained.

Katsuki stretches out his arm, palm facing the man, and uses his other hand to form a circle on his palm. He aims directly for the man’s chest.

This man is the same color as the concrete sidewalks. It is possible his quirk can cover or change his skin into any material he touches. If so, this attack will be enough to break that skin.

The heat of his explosions builds at the single point on his outstretched palm. And as the man reaches the five-foot mark, his fist winding back, a concentrated beam detonates from Katsuki’s palm.

AP Shot.

A large explosive blast slams into the man’s chest, knocking him clean off his feet. He crashes onto his back, dazed and groaning. The concrete material over his chest breaks away to reveal the man’s skin, already bruising from the blast.

Katsuki stands over the man before he can catch his breath. And he grabs his face, slamming his head back into the ground. Crouching, he leans forward, a wide and ferocious smile on his face.

“I’d stay down if I were you, buddy.”

The man raises his hands in surrender.

“Good job, kid,” Miruko’s voice calls from behind. She pops into view, and the man visibly stiffens.

“I didn’t know Miruko was with you,” he stammers. “I didn’t mean it, I swear. I was just a little mad.”

They ignore his comments. Katsuki looks up at her, but he does not remove his hand from the man’s face.

“He threw a tantrum in the middle of the street,” Katsuki explains.

“That’s pretty rude!” Miruko scolds the man, and he swallows. “I’ve caught a few villains on my route, and the police are rounding them up now. I’ll call them over here.”

“I didn’t finish my patrol though,” Katsuki points out, and Miruko looks pensive as she holds her chin.

“How about we loop through the parts you didn’t reach after lunch? I don’t know about you, but I’m starving! The best yakitori restaurant I know is in Noge not far from here,” Miruko offers, a hand rests on her stomach. A sly grin tugs at her face. “When the police nab this guy, how about a race, kid?”

Katsuki laughs.

“You’re on.”

·–·–·

His phone rings during lunch. Katsuki slips the device out of his leg pouch and glances at the screen. Why is Midoriya calling him?

“I need to answer this,” Katsuki grumbles, sliding out of his seat and exiting the restaurant. He slips into the small alleyway between the buildings before answering.

“Hello?”

“Guess what!”

“No.”

Unfazed by Katsuki’s negativity, Midoriya continues. *“Gran Torino and I stopped a store robbery today.”*

“Congratulations.”

“We’ve been working hard on honing Full Cowling, and Gran Torino decided it was time I got some experience using it, and wham! Out of nowhere, the windows of a jewelry store shatter. One of the robbers—he had this ultrasonic vibration quirk—vaulted through the window. We ran right into the scene.”

“Uh-huh,” Katsuki hums, amused by the sheer innocence and excitement in his hurrying voice. Not counting the attack at the practical training arena, this has to be Midoriya’s very first villain takedown as a hero-in-training. One that is not so scarring. “How did it feel?”

“I… It was nerve-wracking at first. Gran Torino moved first and yelled at me to keep up. I was already kind of nervous for my first patrol, and then this happened. But… I saw the second robber

threatening the store workers inside, and I just… moved." Midoriya quiets for a moment. *"With my two hands, I stopped a hostile situation. I saved people, Kacchan. It was—everything happened so fast—I'm still shaking from the nerves. From everything, really. And… I think I was using six percent. I don't know; I just felt faster."*

"Did this just happen?"

"Oh! Yeah, and the police just arrived. And an ambulance, but no one was hurt. I think it is precautionary. Gran Torino is talking to the police. I should really be over there. I just wanted to tell someone."

"Well, good job, I guess," Katsuki says. The compliment feels strange on his tongue. The line goes quiet, and he glances around the alleyway as if it would help cull the growing discomfort. "Is that it?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." Midoriya makes a strangled noise. *"No, actually. I just.. I've been stewing on this for a while, and this robbery got me thinking about how stupid that is. If I can squash my nervousness and help those people, why am I hesitating on this?"*

"What're you talking about?"

"I'm worried about Iida."

"Who?"

Midoriya struggles with his words for a second.

"I can't tell if you're joking or not."

"I am. Calm your tits. What's wrong with him?"

"You don't know? His brother, pro hero Ingenium, was injured by the hero killer."

"Fuck, I forgot they were related."

"Kacchan."

"Don't judge me. I've been busy."

"Well, Iida's not answering my calls, and when I text him, he gives me these stunted half replies. I'm really worried about him."

"Sounds like he wants to be left alone to me."

"I get that, I really do, but I don't think that's it. I couldn't sleep last night, so I researched the hero killer, Stain. His ideologies are all over the internet. Did you know he's murdered 17 heroes and severely injured 23 more? A tabloid TV segment was talking about how 60% of his victims can be found in deserted dead corners. And someone recently found a victim in a dead alleyway in Hosu. Hosu, Kacchan. That's where Iida is. What if he knew about that? What if he chose Hosu just to pursue the hero killer? It's not set in stone, and these are just guesses, and Stain might not be there anymore, but still. There is still the possibility Iida will run into him."

"Midoriya. Breathe."

"And now there's buzz everywhere that Stain recruited Ground Zero to join him. A hero found them secretly meeting somewhere in Tokyo not too far from Hosu. What if Iida runs into both of them? What if he confronts them? I need to know he isn't going to do something he'll regret."

There is buzz about *what* now? Katsuki shakes his head. *No*. He does not care about internet gossip. Not the most concerning topic at the moment. He breathes deeply.

"Let me get this straight. You want to travel to an area with a serial murderer on the loose because you want to track down your friend who is chasing said serial murderer? Did I get that right?"

"I—"

"Are you dumb?"

"Iida's my friend. I can't just sit back and do nothing anymore."

"No, but you can let the pros do their jobs first. You just said the area is dangerous, so why do you need to go there? Just stay put, and wait until the internship's over to reach out."

"How do you know that won't be too late? What if he confronts the hero killer? Then what?"

"I…" Katsuki trails off, frowning. "I don't know, but that doesn't give you reason to stand between Iida and his problems."

"All Might would tell me that butting in is one of the principal qualities of a hero. He'd tell me it's a hero's job to save people in trouble. That looking out for my friend's wellbeing is a good reason."

"I'm not that old man."

"Clearly."

Katsuki's eye twitches.

"I'm going to let that dig slide because you're high off your first real villain bust," he warns. "But next time, I'll knock your teeth in."

"I just want to make sure my friend is okay. Why can't you understand that?"

Because someone has to look out for you too, Katsuki thinks.

Because trouble sticks to this boy like glue, and Katsuki cannot say with utmost confidence that nothing will happen. If something were to happen, Midoriya is the type of person to run straight into the fray. He has been doing it since they were in preschool.

The need to save someone. To protect. It lives at Midoriya's core. And right now, it is pure. A naïve, childlike need to hold out a helping hand with a smile on his face. It has not morphed, mutated, into something obsessive and twisted. Yet.

But Katsuki knows how this trait chips off little pieces of Midoriya as he walks along the path of a hero. This profession is one that runs its workers ragged until there is nothing left to them. Not even the will to help others. And as the successor of One-For-All, the time will come for Midoriya to experience every single loss of innocence Katsuki can imagine. The time will come quick for

him to trade away the last vestiges of his childhood for maturity. To assume the responsibilities no teenager could ever envision. And he will *never* get that innocence back.

But Midoriya is lucky. He has All Might and his aggravating words. He has Gran Torino.

However, Iida lost his role model. He witnessed the defiling of his hero paradigm. And with it, he lost a bit of his innocence. Katsuki cannot say he has not been filled with rage and revenge before. That he has not been driven by pure emotion. His childhood was filled with acts based solely on emotion. His adulthood is filled with trying to deny those emotions.

To actively seek out the ward Stain has been spotted, he must feel compelled enough by these feelings of rage to try and avenge his brother. To chase a murderer down because one of his most trusted supporters cannot guide him anymore. This sudden shift of responsibility, to avenge his brother's ruined hero career, will curse him in vast steps of solitude.

And Katsuki had the gall to suggest leaving him alone. That is probably the last thing someone should do right now. Maybe Midoriya can sense this. Maybe he understands right away something is deeply wrong with his friend.

Who is Katsuki to stop him from trying to support his friend through a difficult time? To stop Midoriya from doing the same thing he asked Uraraka and Iida to do?

"Under no circumstances are you to engage the hero killer. I don't care what you find. You got that?"

"I know, I know. I'm not planning to. Really."

Katsuki ends the call, letting his arm fall limp and tilting his head back until it presses against the cool wall of the restaurant.

He is a joke, right? Here he is enjoying the life of a child—going to school, making friends, gaining valuable mentorship—like he has not already done this before. Like he has not already lost these luxuries. He had his innocence completely ripped from him by the end of his first year of high school.

At the end of the day, even if no one else knows, Katsuki is still the adult in this situation. He is afraid Midoriya will run into Stain? Then he should prevent such a meeting from occurring in the first place. He is the one in a position where he can do such a thing. Midoriya, and Iida, they will relinquish the rest of their childhood soon enough, but hopefully by then, they will be a little bit more prepared. Because they are allowed to be kids before being thrust into maturity ahead of their time.

All right. It is hero killer hunting hours. However, he needs to do a bit of shopping if he wants to win this fight. Because he refuses to confront Stain in a fucking sweatshirt.

His phone rings again.

"What is it now, nerd?"

"What did you call me?"

"What?"

“What did you call me?”

“Nerd?”

“No—”

“I didn’t call you. You called me.”

“Oh my god. You called me, ‘Midoriya.’ You said, ‘Midoriya, breathe.’ ”

“So?”

The line goes so quiet.

“Nothing, never mind. Sorry for bothering you.” Midoriya hangs up.

Katsuki stares at his phone screen as if it will tell him what that was about.

“The fuck?”

._._. **Stain’s POV** ._._.

“In order to accomplish anything, you need a creed. A strong mindset,” Stain says, digging his foot deeper into the man-child’s arm. He hovers over his prone body with knives pressed against his neck. “Culling those weaklings who lack them both is only natural. That is why you die.”

He had just found his little target parading around Yokohama with one of those societal cancers when he was engulfed in a mass of black mist and deposited in a rundown bar.

All because a man-child and his pet butler want to recruit him into their little band of villains.

“Hah, you’re too strong, damn it,” the man-child laughs, pain lacing his voice. “Kurogiri! Send him back already!”

The ghostly butler groans, his body leaning heavily against the bar countertop. “My apologies… my body won’t move. This must be the work of the hero killer’s quirk.”

Stain narrows his eyes at the unimpressive young man in his hold.

“A mere teenager accomplishes more than you aimless criminals and those fake heroes because he has both a creed and a mind made up to save those who die from the societal scum and their negligence.”

Stain does not care much for the acts of other vigilantes. They threaten the corrupt hero society that plagues Japan by forgoing the laws that created these fake heroes. But the ones that stand out, the vigilantes who get noticed by all of Japan, are worthless. They crumble under their own creeds because their minds are not strong enough. They lose to those crooked heroes. They are ridiculed and laughed at because they are weak.

Stain did not care much for the acts of other vigilantes until the news media exploded with a scandal. A fake hero was exposed as a greed-filled weakling by the person he supposedly saved.

The final victim of a series of mindless murders was not saved by said fake hero, but by a vigilante instead.

Ground Zero.

A vigilante of unknown origin with a name coined by the many people he saved. He operates solely at night, helping the desperate in barely a disguise. A ghost who possesses his followers, wheedling doubt into their minds that the fake heroes are useless leeches failing to notice them suffer.

But this ghost turned out to be a child training to join that corrupt hero society. This knowledge angered Stain to his core. The same vigilante who discovered a human trafficking ring hides himself amongst the scum of hero society. How can he straddle the paths of a true and fake hero?

But then realization hit him. This child is lacking proper guidance. Stain used to be the same. To become Stendhal, he wore a mask. Wore an identity. And when he took it off, he was a meager member of society. If the vigilante of Naruhata had not shown him the err of his ways years ago, the fault in his creed and the weakness in his mind, he would have never committed to his true identity. Stain. Bringer of truth.

He will set the boy straight. People reveal their true selves when they are shoved against death's door. Whether Ground Zero is a seedling of a true hero or the poison of a fake, Stain will unmask him. If he is the hero Stain thinks he is, he will guide the boy. It is the perfect way to honor the guidance bestowed upon himself.

"The word, 'hero' has lost all meaning in this society overrun by fakes. Even criminals like you who pointlessly scatter their power become target to purges," Stain threatens. He drags his knife closer to the man-child's neck, digging into the petrified hand covering most of his face.

The man-child's eyes widen.

"Just wait a second," he demands, a deathly calm to his voice. A pale hand loosely touches his knife. "This palm… you can't. I'll *kill* you."

Five fingers grip the blade.

"You're awfully talkative. A conviction? A creed? I ain't got anything so dramatic. Though if I were forced to say…"

The metal disintegrates immediately.

"It's All Might." His voice is laced with hatred as a vicious smile cracks his lips. "I want to crush the society where that *trash* is set up so high and mighty to the goddamn ground. That's what I've been thinking!"

A shudder claws through Stain's body, and pure instinct tells him to back off. The same hand that destroyed his knife reaches for his head. He jumps back, slicing through the man-child's shoulder as he dodges death.

The man-child groans, curling his fingers over the gash in his shoulder.

"Damn it, this hurts. We don't have a healer in our party, so you better take responsibility for this."

“So, that’s what you’re about,” Stain muses, garnering confusion from the room. He sheathes his intact knife. “It seems our goals lie at polar opposites, but destroying today’s society is the one point we have in common.”

The man-child laughs humorlessly.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Get the fuck out and die. Aren’t I the type you despise the most?”

Stain cracks his neck.

“I tested your mettle. Those at death’s door always express their true colors. You’re an odd one, but the seeds of a crooked creed dwell inside you. I wonder what fruits those seeds will bear.”

What atrocities they will cause. He will save disposing of this villain until after he has fully ascertained him. Fully decided his level of threat.

“I hate the idea of having such a nutjob around as a party member,” the man-child grumbles.

“Shigaraki, if we add him to our ranks, then our battle power will magnify. The negotiations you led have come to fulfillment,” the butler reasons. His movement is returning to him slowly.

Stain looks at the butler.

“This order of business is settled. Now, return me to Yokohama. I’ve got something to pick up before I finish my work in Hosu.”

When he steps through the swirling, black warp gate, he drops onto a rooftop, rolling to his feet. Naka Ward. He will start here based on the Herogram posts from earlier today.

But it does not take long for a familiar and sarcastic voice to find him.

“I was about to head to Hosu, but you actually followed me here. Not sure if I’m angry or flattered.”

Stain whirls in his spot and throws a knife in the direction of the voice. From the ledge shrouded in darkness, Ground Zero hops down, twirling the knife between his fingers as he walks forward.

He altered his appearance. A protective vest sits over a hoodie. Guards and pads cover his elbows, knees, and shins. Knuckle bracers are slipped over grey gloves.

“Round two.”

Chapter End Notes

With the power of anime and caffeine, I will finish this arc in one chapter.

Note A: I cannot begin to express how much I love and appreciate Anonemoni for making the fanart of Katsuki in his new and improved Ground Zero uniform. The full link to the piece is here.

Note B: So, I saw a TikTok by @jessyyybae and had to incorporate it somehow into my fic. I don't care if I've gone rogue. The flashback/flash forward scene at the gala was inspired by her. It's peak Katsu-Izu shenanigans.

Note C: Tonjiru is pork and vegetable miso soup. Yakitori is grilled chicken.

Note D: Bakugou loves Indian food, and you can't take this away from me. The pro heroes in Delhi ruined this boy, and he can never eat at a restaurant without comparing the dishes to their homecooked meals. Tehri is one of the foods he learned to make during his university days.

And when the sun comes up, you'll find a brand-new god

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki was thrown a bit off-kilter by the words of the hero killer. He started the second half of his internship with Miruko and fought an enraged ex-salaryman. However, after a phone call with Midoriya, he winds up challenging Stain to one more fight.

Hellooo, you guys remember me lol. And, yes, I did write the last 6K in the past 24 hours. I cannot be held responsible for anything you may read.

Part four out of four* of the field internship arc. Song title is from "Leave Me Alone" by I Don't Know How But They Found Me. This is a long one. POV changes ahead. We pick up on the night of internship day four.

Warning: This chapter is a little dark at certain parts of the fight scenes. Includes drugging and canon-typical(?) violence.

Tentative Chapter 15 Post Date: August 24, 2021

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Katsuki's POV** ._._.

Stain's eyes flicker to the knife twirling between Katsuki's fingers before regarding the rest of him.

"Does this change imply that you're taking this position seriously?" Stain asks.

"It *implies* me protecting my vitals," Katsuki snaps. "I'm only here because you're a threat to someone."

"I'm not your enemy, Ground Zero. I've told you already."

"We're not friends either."

"No," Stain agrees. "But we are two sides of the same coin, both working to restore the word, 'hero,' in this corrupt society."

Katsuki stares at the man, the silence stretching in the air.

"Answer me this. Why did you kill that hero in Kawasaki, Slingshot?"

"He was a fake who cared more about advancing his rank than protecting the people. Crime never fell in the wards he patrolled because he was too busy promoting his collectables," Stain answers, his face curdled as if something spoiled touched his tongue.

"And Ingenium? Why go after him? He was the poster child for a 'real' hero," Katsuki asks.

Stain regards his question with a slight frown, slowly rolling his shoulders back to stand a bit taller.

“Because he was weak,” he replies simply. “Weak links who can’t beat me can’t be heroes. I spared his life, but I made sure he will never walk the path of a hero again.”

Something simmers in Katsuki’s gut, gradually building in pressure. He breathes deeply.

“This is why we’re different,” Katsuki says. “That fantasy inside your head won’t beget your so-called ‘real’ heroes. No amount of culling will. And if you hold everyone up to an impossible standard, the fallout when that standard fails will be catastrophic.”

He stares at the dim reflection of the moon against the silver blade in his hand.

“Strength comes in many forms, and the same can be said for heroes. Ingenium inspired the next generation of heroes. He wasn’t weak.”

He flips the knife over, gripping it between nimble fingers. The double-sided blade points towards his body.

“But I’m no saint nor do I give speeches.”

He came here to smooth over an annoying bump in the road, not question his views on society. Stain’s hands hover over his holstered knives. He tilts his head back, looking down on Katsuki from the tip of his nose.

“Are you willing to die for your creed?” he asks in a hardened voice.

“What?”

“You vouch for these fakes. The same ones who turn around and drive a stake through your back. All right. Are you willing to die for your creed?”

Katsuki sighs. Being a pro hero is already an unforgiving profession, and the ones who are unprepared will suffer when disaster strikes. So, stop making him the bad guy because he thinks a hero-for-hire should not die.

On the other hand, a person does not have to be a pro to be a hero. Any random person on the street can help another. Like a patient shop owner who prevented a confused young man from making a huge mistake.

But he is tired of talking.

“I can’t protect shit if I’m dead,” Katsuki answers, frustration tinging his words.

“Then, let us see how long you can stand up for these fakes. If you fall, I will correct you.”

A knife zips towards Katsuki.

His body tenses in anticipation. He jerks his head to the side as the blade whizzes past his cheek. Raising his commandeered knife in the nick of time, he clashes with Stain.

Stain adds weight to his weapon, pressing forward with a step of his foot and forcing Katsuki to use both of his hands. He snatches another knife from his holster and slices into Katsuki just below the

bottom of his vest.

A sharp burning trails along his lower stomach. Katsuki sucks in a quick breath. He feels compelled to look down from how his shirt sticks to his skin with a searing touch, but the red-dyed blade in Stain's hand is more concerning. He cannot let him bring that knife to his face.

Katsuki headbutts Stain.

The force against his knife lets up, and he directs their weapons to the side, the blades grating against each other. He frees his left hand from the knife, winding up his body.

And he punches Stain in the solar plexus.

The man grunts as Katsuki steps forward and wraps his hand around Stain's wrist, twisting and forcing it at an unbearable angle until the bloody knife clatters on the rooftop floor. He kicks it away and knees the man in the stomach.

Stain stumbles back, ripping his wrist from Katsuki's hold.

"Taste my blood. I dare you," Katsuki threatens.

"So, you're aware of my quirk," Stain observes. His voice is a little strained, and his body is hunched as he stalks around him. "Good. Never jump into a fight unprepared."

"Shut *up*," Katsuki growls, keeping the man in his sights as he sprints forward.

He fakes a jab forward with his knife. Stain prepares to block, but Katsuki spins on his toes at the last second, driving the knife towards Stain's side. It clashes with another knife. And the man seizes his arm, twisting it behind his back.

Stain's voice is right next to his ear.

"Knives aren't your strong suit."

Katsuki stamps on his foot, smashing his head back. Stain slinks back again as Katsuki rolls his shoulder. He pitches the knife until it clatters across the rooftop, away from the both of them.

"You're right. I hate knife fights," he admits. "I'd rather punch your lights out."

The wicked grin Stain gives him will haunt the corners of his mind.

Stain darts forward. Katsuki goes for a right hook, but the man dodges, slicing at his cheek with one hand and stabbing towards his arm with the other. Katsuki drops immediately and sweeps Stain's feet from out under him. He dives into his stomach, wrapping his arms around his waist and shoving his falling form backwards. Stain slams into ground, his head cracking against the concrete, as Katsuki snatches the knife in one of his hands.

Pressure punches his thigh unannounced, and before he can register the feeling, Katsuki's body stops listening to him.

Oh.

His muscles, his limbs, stop listening to him, and his body slumps to the side. His shoulder hits the ground, his cheek pressing against the cool concrete.

Katsuki tries to move his fingers, his toes, only resulting in a blank blink of his eyes and an involuntary shiver crawling down his spine.

A knife kisses his neck, just barely pinching his skin as a sliver of red drags to the ground. Stain crouches in front of his prone body, his eyes failing to focus completely.

“On this roof, you would die with your creed,” Stain muses. “Wanting to protect and see the worth in everyone are laudable feats. You share the potential of a true hero. But these fakes don’t deserve that kindness. They take up the mantle only to desecrate it with their actions. Understand that.”

The simmering deep inside his gut mutates into hot licks of anger that boil his body. Why the fuck did he not grab both arms at the same time?

But the blade disappears.

Hands pull Katsuki from the ground and prop him against the door to the rooftop access entrance. Stain produces a small glass bottle from his person.

“What’re you doing?” Kastuki asks with hurried uneasiness.

Stain grips the back of his hood, pulling at his hair and tilting his head back, and he pours the contents of the bottle onto his facemask.

The noise that rips from Katsuki’s throat is not human. A smell so sweet assaults his senses as the drenched mask suctions to his nose and mouth, making it hard to breathe. A sweet smell.

Chloroform.

The realization in his eyes and the immediate halting of his breath bring a haunting grin to Stain’s face.

“I told you I would correct you if you fell. Liberate you of your mask as a fake hero before it’s too late. You will see truth with me,” Stain says, his words exasperating Katsuki’s panic. “But it’ll take time to cleanse you of their teachings. And as someone who knows of my quirk, you must know how long it will take effect. I can’t move you when you’re kicking and screaming like a child.”

Katsuki *thrashes*—no, he does not. He wants to thrash. He wants to run, to push, to shove, to anything, but he cannot. As his mind urges his body to move, he lies limp against the metal door.

The breath he tries so hard to hold fails to stay confined in his burning lungs. Given his age, he has about two-to-three minutes before the anesthetic knocks him out. And given his blood type, Stain can paralyze him for around three minutes.

Fear sinks its claws into his skin. It latches onto his mind and leaves his heart pounding in his ears. It feels like the phantom touches of rough fingers on his neck. Like the serrated teeth of metal on his wrists. The intensity of it corners him like a wild animal, feeding his anger. He cannot move. He cannot breathe. He cannot escape.

“Oh my god,” someone gasps across the rooftop. The words echo a bit in Katsuki’s ears, slurring even though they are not drunk.

“Oh my god,” they repeat.

With the uncomfortable angle his head is tilted, Katsuki strains his eyes downward to just barely see the visitor. The pro hero from last night finds them once again. Why is he here? How is he here? This is an entirely different city; an entirely different prefecture. If he was running away from Stain, from his lies, he crashed right into them. What shit luck this guy has.

Firecracker looks stuck between bolting and staying rooted to the spot.

Stain speaks harshly in his ear, “You foiled my attempts the first time, but this time, you will watch me kill this worthless thing you tried to protect.”

“Don’t—” Katsuki starts to say, but the hero killer ignores him as he stands.

Stain unsheathes his katana as he stalks forward, and the growing threat in front of him breathes life into the frozen pro hero.

“Run!” Katsuki yells, breathless. His head feels heavy on his neck, and he has to strain his eyes to see past the fuzzy darkness encroaching on the edges of his vision.

With shaky hands, Firecracker shoots fireworks from his palms, running to the side to put distance between him and Stain. Yet, the action only moves him from the fire escape and his exit. Each zipping firework misses the hero killer as he dances around the bright explosions.

And as Stain drives his blade into the hero’s stomach, Firecracker’s hands jolt towards the sky. Beautiful colors paint the night sky as dark red paints the hero’s suit.

His hands run dry, shakily reaching for the blade in his stomach, until Stain rips the katana out. A scream full of agony explodes from Firecracker’s lips. He curls into a ball, knees touching his forehead as he presses on the stab wound with his hands. His body goes limp when Stain licks a strip of blood from the katana, screams still wailing in the air.

Katsuki’s fingers twitch.

Stain stalks back over to Katsuki. The man grabs his jaw and roughly directs his head to Firecracker's hunched body.

And his voice echoes in his ear, “Not only will he die waiting for a hero, but he will die because he was too weak to be one. Fakes like him are a dime a dozen, infesting society like roaches. This is not a hero.”

He sighs, “These fakes poisoned your mind with their notions. Remove their flaws from your creed, from your mind, and you will remove the weakness from your body.”

And, as if whispering in his other ear, the words of the nightmare in a red yaksha mask who jumpstarted his vigilantism slither out.

“It seems, no matter how you grow, weakness is in your DNA.”

Katsuki’s breath catches. There is a burning twinge in his lungs—in his throat—as if he breathes in smoke, rising from the heat overflowing the pit of his stomach.

He reaches his boiling point.

The fear latched to his skin, the jittering panic thrumming under his skin—they smooth as if something caustic and scalding washes over it in waves like an ocean on a sandy beach, drowning the emotions against their will. They are dragged down deep to melt at his core. And what is left is nothing less than apoplectic quietness.

His arm shoots out, and he grabs Stain by the neck, digging his fingernails into the man's skin.

He sets off his quirk.

Stain lurches backwards, rolling on the ground. But before he can even register the pain blistering his throat—the melted pieces of glove melding to his skin—Katsuki is hovering over him, face mask ripped from his body, his eyes alight in pure rage. The fuzzy rim around his vision dips in red.

And in that moment, Stain looks unnerved.

Stain kicks out, aiming to put distance between them and assess the shift in their situation. His foot connects with Katsuki's stomach, but he holds onto it. The protruding spikes on Stain's boot graze Katsuki's skin as he tightly wraps his arm around Stain's lower leg. With a sharp inhale, he winds back his fist. He strikes his leg once, twice, until—

Crack.

Air squeezes from Stain's lungs; a soundless shudder quivers his lips. He reaches for a knife as Katsuki drops to his knees over the man, but it is ripped from his grasp and driven through his hand.

When he fully faces the man again, he draws back an arm. His fists are a steady drumbeat to the man's face, knocking his head side to side, until his knuckle bracers are dripping in red. Pressure punches his arm, his calf, his thigh, but that is all it amounts to. Irritating pressure. He grabs the hand stabbing his thigh and holds it in place. He presses Stain's other arm into the concrete.

"Remove their flaws, you say. Why? So, I can do this? Break a man beyond repair to prove a point? Look another in the eye and kill them if they stand in my way?" Katsuki asks. It is strange. Anger corrodes his insides, but the words that leave his body are iced in a calmness that prickles his skin. "If this is what you want from me, then I can't be a hero. This isn't strength."

A wave of vertigo slowly washes over his body. His eyes threaten to send him down a dark tunnel, and the breath he takes is wrapped in cement.

He feels sluggish, turning his head slowly to take in his surroundings before looking down at the man under him. Stain lies on the ground, ragged gasps keeping him conscious.

Is it possible to feel weary and angry at the same time? How fatigue and fury take turns submerging him to the slow thud of his heart?

"Don't push your ideals on me and call them guidance. A 'true' hero won't turn a blind eye to your actions. You want to shed light on corruption in hero society? Be my guest. But a killing spree isn't justice." Katsuki sighs.

Ragged breath is his only answer. He is unsure if Stain can even hear him. He went overboard.

Katsuki peels the damaged gloves from his hands. He retrieves the medical supplies he stored in his leg pouches, covering the burns on Stain's throat with a wetted bandage. He cleans around the knife in Stain's hand, but keeps it in place, securing it with the bandages to prevent movement. He puts Stain's leg into a makeshift split with bandages and his shin guards. That is the best he can do.

Besides, Stain is not the main concern here.

Katsuki struggles to his feet. It is hard for some reason. He stumbles towards Firecracker, crashing to his knees faster than anticipated. The man's cries have quieted to incomprehensible mumbles, but he is still alive. He needs to put pressure on this wound. The slight puddle of blood seeping from him is already too much blood loss.

A wave of anger washes over him, and the heat inside his body fuels him.

"Why are you here," Katsuki says. It is an accusation, not a question. The man cannot answer him, he is delirious, and Katsuki's question falls on deaf ears. He clicks his tongue, trying his best to clean and cover the wound, but the fear crawls back to him that Firecracker may not make it. And it is his fault.

"I can't save you," Katsuki says in a defeated whisper.

Bang!

He jumps at the sound—at the rush of sounds that one bang sets off in his mind, his surroundings echoing in his ears and blurring in his eyes. Only then does Katsuki notice the faint red and blue lights, the whirring police sirens, the stomps of people climbing the fire escape, and the repetitive banging on the rooftop access door.

They will be assisted by people far more experienced than he. He needs to get out of here.

"You better pull through," he whispers more to himself than to Firecracker as he stands on shaky legs.

Katsuki is not quite sure how he made it in a dumpster, but he pulls himself from the cushioning trash and tumbles to the ground. He gives the top of the building one last look before stumbling out of the alleyway, dots dancing in his vision.

Walking is difficult. Moving his arm is difficult.

He finds himself leaning heavily against a streetlight. Katsuki lets out a long, shuddering exhale, tilting his head onto the cool metal and closing his eyes. His undulating rage subsides; heat drains from his body and leaves him cold. It drips to the ground from his fingertips, sticks his sweatshirt to his body, makes him shiver. He looks down.

Oh. That is his blood.

The sight of it threatens him. Katsuki takes one step, and his legs turn to water.

"Move! He needs help!"

His vision fails him, the dots multiplying exponentially, as he stares at the cigarette butt lying on the pavement in front of him.

“Someone, help me get him into that car. Please!”

“I’ve got him.”

He hears muted yelling above him, and then, weightlessness.

“Take me back to the hospital. Now!”

“Come on, kid. Stay with me.”

“Sir, please don’t fall asl—”

.–.–.

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/dbsdbs · 3h

[**GZ**] Sharing the TúTube video a resident of the neighboring apartment building uploaded.

...I snagged it before it got taken down. Clips (and that screenshot of Ground Zero standing over the Hero Killer) circulated around Chirper for a hot second until mods took them down. Hope some news outlets pick this up. It’s only a matter of time before the resident starts talking.

I made a dummy website and uploaded the video here. If this gets taken down somehow, I’ll make another website and share it.

#groundzeroarmy

Edit 1: Okay, there was a comment on the violence, so I blurred certain aspects of the video and reuploaded it to the site.

Edit 2: I’m linking the blog post I found here. I scoured everywhere, and there’s been no media coverage yet. But Zo’s blog speculates a lot here.

What Do They Stand For? A Clash Between Vigilantes *– Zo’s Hero Blog*

Edit 3: Okay, Yokohama Journal is the trendsetter. Besides the Firecracker pity piece, there was one article on the night! Didn’t see her in the video, but Rabbit Hero Miruko was apparently dispatched along with the police.

‘I Never Wanted This.’ Firecracker Retires After Five Months *– Yokohama Journal*

Stain Detained! Ground Zero Takes Yokohama *– Yokohama Journal*

Edit 4: Am I stupid, or did the “Stain Detained!” Yokohama Journal article suddenly disappear from the site??

881k upvotes · 9k comments

…

[Best Comments]

itwasmeallalong · 3h

Why did he help Firecracker

124k upvotes · 91 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| gloobbabs · 3h

|| *Because he has a heart, you heathen.*

|| 89k upvotes · 100 replies

|| piratebooties270 · 3h

|| *I demand a public apology from Firecracker*

|| 73k upvotes · 67 replies

|||| groundzerosfacemask · 3h

|||| *I demand to know why Ground Zero casually walked off a ledge.*

|||| riptide410 · 3h

|||| *I demand to know what tf Ground Zero and Stain were talking about*

|||| hellavatime · 1h

|||| *If you read the article by Yokohama Journal, Firecracker does apologize. It's not really a pity piece imo. I'm not saying what he did wasn't shitty, but he also wasn't a hero who fought bigtime villains. He was more like a "rescue kittens out of a tree" or a "read to kids at the library" type of hero. His PR guy pushed him to do more. Just read the article.*

.

starryeyesinthenight · 3h

Um… Is no one going to mention how violent and scary this video is? Um? Great, Ground Zero is clearly not working with Stain, but I'm not sure this video should be circulating around… Children will see this.

103k upvotes · 201 replies

|| [Recent Replies]

|| immagoose11 · 21m

|| *lmao too bad :)*

|| 501 upvotes · 10 replies

|| notthepatriarchy · 9m

|| *whatd you expect? rainbows? ig theres pretty fireworks :)*

|| 824 upvotes · 27 replies

.

takoyakibaby32 · 2h

I know y'all saw it. #groundzeroisntquirkless

225k upvotes · 502 replies

|| [Recent Replies]

|| allmightsleftpec · 15m

|| *Stop spreading this. Let me tell you the reasons why he is quirkless:*

(1) He never used a quirk before. Out of the 74 unique threads/posts on Ground Zero's activity, 0 of original posters record any type of quirk being used.

(2) He changed his vigilante costume in this video. You can see multiple changes in his costume (e.g., vest, guards, gloves). The flash in question came from one of his gloved hands. What makes you think it wasn't just a support item? What makes you think it wasn't just something rigged in his glove?

(3) He only uses this "quirk" once. His glove "explodes" once, and then Ground Zero never uses it again. We don't see another flash. This leads me to think it was a one-and-done support item, or the support item broke.

(4) If he had a quirk all this time, how come he never used it before? Why would he knowingly make being a vigilante harder by not using his quirk? He could save so many more people if he used it. Ground Zero doesn't strike me as the type to pull his punches.

Bottom line, I don't think he has a quirk. Let's not jump to conclusions.

|| 12k upvotes · 65 replies

|||| takoyakibaby32 · 12m

|||| *He's cooler with a quirk tho. Why're you trying so hard to deny it? Quirkless people shouldn't be doing what he does anyways… But that's probably why he's a vigilante then. If he doesn't have a quirk or it's lame, he can't be a hero. Like he could, but lol. But he's got flashy hands?? Why wouldn't that be entertaining?*

|| noragrets · 7m

|| [deleted]

|| 553 upvotes · 4 replies

|||| revelryinthedark · 7m

|||| *Stop. We shouldn't be trying to out him.*

.

drowninginmargs · 2h

Chirper is in shambles.

348k upvotes · 93 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| mirukobesties · 2h

|| *It would be funnier if everything didn't get taken down immediately. Same with TúTube. Heroddit's the only safe one lol. I think* ***h/yokohamanews*** *and* ***h/musutafunews*** *are also talking about it.*

|| 66k upvotes · 15 replies

|| rokutheloofa · 2h

|| *stain roast account is doing fine*

|| 135k upvotes · 69 replies

|||| akascuseme · 2h

|||| *stain's wat*

|||| sososocial · 49m

|||| *That account is the only thing keeping me sane right now. #groundzeroarmyhasnochill #isgroundzeroalive #pleasebeokay*

.

pandamanda · 3h

Does anyone else find it telling that the same vigilante brought down another serial killer the pros couldn't catch?

310k upvotes · 124 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| cryohydro · 3h

|| *Friend, it's more telling these pros need a vigilante to protect them. Actually, it's laughable. How am I supposed to put my faith in people who can't even protect themselves?*

|| 121k upvotes · 22 replies

|| abbythetabby · 3h

|| *Stain took the heroes in my area out of commission, and then crime went down. Make it make sense.*

|| 97k upvotes · 16 replies

|| ginbiscuit · 3h

|| *this is gonna sound super mean, but maybe stain was onto something lol. there's too many heroes who ain't shit. the quirkless guy in a sweatshirt has to save your asses lol. quit like firecracker already*

|| 86k upvotes · 101 replies

|||| bombsquad555 · 3h

|||| *shuddap. All Might oneshots everyone including stain and zero*

|||||| yikyakbigmac · 3h

|||||| *I don't think they were talking about All Might, love.*

._._. **Izuku's POV** ._._.

Izuku calls Kacchan, and his voicemail message plays again. He pulls the phone away from his ear, worrying his bottom lip as he stares at the frowning profile picture in his contacts. As if his silent scowl will negate Izuku's suspicions.

This means nothing. Kacchan has always been a deep sleeper. It is way past his bedtime. Practically morning. Izuku conveniently ignores the wriggling thought in his mind that Kacchan does not look like he sleeps anymore. He tries to stop the train of realizations that missed his station until tonight.

He calls again. Voicemail. Again.

Kacchan is *asleep*.

He checks the sub-heroddit and reports more comments.

He is an idiot.

._._. **Internship Day 5** – Katsuki's POV ._._.

The first thought to cross Katsuki's mind is longing for the half-empty bottle of whiskey sitting in his parents' house.

The next is pain.

The second he remembers he can move, he sets off a chain reaction of pain and soreness throughout his body, awakening it from slumber. It feels almost searing in certain areas—his arm, his leg, his

stomach. The sharp breath he inhales prickles his lungs with barbed wire, only making the burning flourish.

When Katsuki peels his eyes open, he is met with unfamiliarity. The ceiling is tan instead of white like at the hotel, and his bedsheets are white instead of gray. A light orange curtain has been pulled to the left of him, and a bright window sits on his right. The room is quiet aside from the low, gradual beeping and the voices just barely echoing from outside the room.

He is in a hospital, if the intravenous line sticking in his arm has anything to say about it. Or the layers of bandages wrapping around his neck, stomach, right arm, and right leg.

Katsuki does not try to move. If he were to move, it would not only hurt, but also expend the little strength he has keeping him awake.

He sighs, closing his eyes again. How did he get here? Last time he remembers, he fought a villain on patrol, had lunch with Miruko, got a distressing phone call from Midoriya…

Fought Stain. Got angry because—*Firecracker*. Is Firecracker all right? There were police on the scene immediately after he wrapped the man's wound to add some pressure. Please, tell him he made it.

Someone clears their throat.

He blinks open his eyes, glancing forward.

And his heart threatens to stop.

Miruko, donned in her hero uniform, sits in the chair in front of him. Her hands are clasped together, elbows propped up on her thighs.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, kid," she greets. "Got anything you want to tell me?"

._._. **Tomura's POV** ._._.

This is fan-fucking-tastic.

Another laugh bubbles out of his mouth as he scrolls down the thousands of chirps, comments, and threads spreading that damn hero killer's demise. He kicks his legs in delight as he sits on the barstool. This is better than anything he could have wished for.

The hero killer had the audacity to lecture him about his stupid, fucking ideals. The audacity to attack him. Then, he goes and gets captured. It is so hilarious, tears well up in the corners of Tomura's eyes.

It is what he deserves!

"Kurogiri," Tomura calls.

Kurogiri stops cleaning the beer glass and places it on the bar countertop.

"Yes, Shigaraki?" he asks, his eyes shifting in the black mist.

Tomura points at the monitor. The shaky video of the fight between the hero killer and that vigilante is paused on his screen.

“Get me him. I want him in my party.”

Kurogiri contemplates his request.

“I can try and search for Mr. Ground Zero; however, it may take quite some time to pin down his patterns. We do not know who he may be.”

Tomura groans, cutting his eyes at the noumu in distain.

“You’re useless.”

The static of Teacher’s audio system crackles.

“I don’t think it will be a problem, Kurogiri,” the screen chimes in. *“As we add new members, we will include ‘Mr. Ground Zero’ as well. But first, let’s wait for the broker to bring his recommendations.”*

Giddiness shakes his hands, and he hops off of the stool, trotting over to the screen. This situation is too good to sit here twiddling his thumbs. He wants to cause a little chaos. Wipe what respect Stain has left off the face of this Earth.

“Teacher, how many noumus are done?” he asks the screen.

“None on the level of the one from the ambush on Yuuei, but I have confirmed eight are operational.”

“Give me them.”

“…Why?”

“Because I can’t stand the hero killer. I want to erase all the hype around him. I want everyone talking about me instead,” Tomura says, his voice drips with more enthusiasm as he speaks. “Smashing shit I don’t like must be all right. And you told me to show the world the true horror of my existence. What better way than doing what the hero killer couldn’t and wreak havoc in Hosu?”

The screen is quiet for a long time.

“I’ll give you five,” the screen finally says. *“I do hope you make this opportunity a learning experience.”*

._._. **Tenya’s POV** ._._.

Derailed.

Tenya is a person of purpose. He studies with the purpose of learning as much as he can from his classes. He assumes his duties as class president with the purpose of providing his fellow classmates with much-needed guidance and support. He trains with the purpose of becoming a proper hero his family can take pride in. He challenges himself with the purpose of living up to his

brother's reputation. He is a forward-moving train, focused on achieving his goals in the most efficient way possible.

However, seeing his brother, barely conscious and severely injured, was a shock to his system. The tubes connected to his body. The ragged breaths fogging his oxygen mask. How Tensei's eyes were filled with not pain nor agony, but with guilt. Shame. Apology.

"Wow, if you look up to me, Tenya, then I just might be an amazing hero after all!"

That look in his brother's eyes crashed into him, and the hero killer's attack derailed Tenya in a way he had never felt before.

Without his brother, Tenya had to figure out how to move forward on his own. But he did it. He fixed his engine and set himself upright on the bloodstained tracks with hatred and hurt pushing him forward. He gradually immersed himself in the news, social media, and online analyses. After he finished his homework, he researched the patterns of the hero killer. After training, he watched the pre-recorded specials on the hero killer's previous victims. He found a new purpose to direct the emotions threatening to consume him, filling him with a single need.

When he held the small dry-erase board in class with half of Tensei's hero codename written on it, his hesitation to claim the name for himself only solidified his answer. There was only one way to take responsibility for his brother's legacy and take on the weight of his brother's defeated eyes.

He was going to kill the hero killer.

The criminal who ruined his brother's career. The criminal who carved that look into his brother's eyes. It was an obvious solution to stave off the growing pit in his heart. He was going to reclaim his brother's reputation from the hero killer, and with it, he was going to reclaim the hero name, "Ingenium."

The hero killer would regret ever crossing his brother.

Then, on the fifth day of his field internship, the fifth day of Tenya's search, he wakes to a shaky video derailing him once again. The hero killer, who was found in a completely different prefecture, was brought to justice all while Tenya slept.

Tenya watched in complete silence as a vigilante stole his purpose from his fingertips. He watched the violent dance between them, the rise and fall of the fireworks hero, and the victory of the vigilante. He watched how, after sustaining several wounds, the vigilante still attempted to provide medical care to both the criminal and the hero before disappearing off the ledge as police poured on the rooftop.

A part of him watched this video with reason. The hero killer has been brought to justice. Upon further investigation, the hero killer has been confined to a temporary prison to recover before his transport to Tartarus. Firecracker—no, Mr. Jiro Matsuda—is responding well to his surgery. This nightmare is over. His crusade has come to an end. He can stop.

And yet, this news does nothing.

The sense of relief; the feeling of closure… As Tenya watched and rewatched the video of Ground Zero and Stain, he felt none of those. Heat smacked his face, and his hands shook in restlessness.

If the hero killer was brought to justice by another, what is he supposed to do now? How is he supposed to face his brother?

What does he do with these unresolved feelings?

A hand clasps his shoulder.

“Morning, Tenya!” Mr. Manual greets with a cheery smile. “Boy, you must be happy, huh? With the hero killer mess finally put to rest?”

Standing in his full hero costume, Tenya’s rigid expression falls blind to Mr. Manual’s eyes. Yet, the hero backpedals his words with a flurry of waving hands.

“Oh gosh, that was unprofessional! I’m sorry, you just seemed so relentlessly focused on something, so it had to be…” Mr. Manual trails off, shaking his head. “We’ve still got a few hours until lunch. We can fit a patrol in before then! Sorry, it’s the same as yesterday, but I hope you’re getting some valuable experience from these patrols.”

“No, I appreciate your teaching methods. Thank you for accepting me for the duration of this internship,” he says with a deep bow. His voice feels a bit robotic.

Mr. Manual had figured out Tenya’s motives for choosing his office the day before yesterday. He warned him of the dangers of his purpose as if it were a mere personal grudge. How heroes do not have the authority to deal out punishments or the jurisdiction to make arrests.

“Heroism must not become mere vigilantism. Under law, that would be a heavy sin.”

Tenya understands his warnings and his concern. He is grateful for his teachings. And yet, vigilantism brought the hero killer to the law while heroism refuses to heal the hole in his heart. He feels incomplete. Lost.

Derailed.

.–.–.

Patrol is quiet. They stroll a fairly vacant street. Trees scarcely line the wide, gray sidewalks, a narrow road sandwiched in between with trucks and cars squeezing by each other in tight lanes.

“Whenever I have too much on my mind, patrolling is my favorite activity to do,” Mr. Manual says. He looks back at Tenya with a sheepish smile before facing forward. He waves at a passerby. “I overthink a lot of things, and busying myself with patrols is the best way to distract myself.”

Mr. Manual comes to a stop and turns to Tenya.

“I know you were using patrols to look for the hero killer before, but now you can use them to take your mind off of him. Stewing in his crimes will only hurt you in the long run. So, why don’t we try to move forward together?”

Move forward. It sounds so easy when his mentor says it. And yet, Tenya’s feet are still stuck. The hatred he feels towards the hero killer, the grief that crushes his heart when he visits the hospital, the pressure weighing on his shoulders to clear his brother’s hero codename. These feelings seize his ankles and keep him rooted to the spot. He looks down at his feet.

“I understand, sir, but what if I experience difficulty? Moving forward, I mean?” Tenya asks.

Mr. Manual rubs the back of his neck.

“Tenya, I can’t imagine what you must be going through, but I do know the more you feed those negative emotions, the more they grow. There isn’t a quick fix. You’re going to find moving forward difficult because those emotions are trying to hold you back,” he explains. Sympathy finds his eyes. “So, give them a name. Recognize them the next time you’re overwhelmed, and fight their whispers.”

“Fight them?”

“Well, yeah! Tell me this: when you think of a hero, who do you imagine?”

There is only one person who occupies Tenya’s mind; only one hero Tenya wishes to become.

“My brother, Tensei. The turbo hero, Ingenium,” he answers immediately.

“Right! Why?”

“What?”

“Why is he the hero you imagine, Tenya? Why is he your goal?” Mr. Manual presses, placing his hands on his hips.

Ever since Tenya was small, he wanted to follow in his brother’s footsteps. From how laidback and personable he is, to how smart and reliable he is, Tensei has always been admirable in everything he does. He could sit and listen to his brother’s stories of rescue missions and team-ups for hours on end.

“My brother… Ingenium is the type of hero who would dash across the land to take a lost child by the hand,” Tenya finally says. He raises his gloved hands, staring at their emptiness. “That is the hero I want to be. To have the speed to put that child at ease even one second sooner.”

A supportive hand finds its way to his shoulder, causing him to glance at his mentor.

“You have a good head on your shoulders, Tenya. Use it. Use your vision of a hero to fight those negative emotions. Use it to drive you forward. Those emotions don’t define you. Your vision, your goal, does. Remember it every time you get overwhelmed, and slowly, those emotions will lose their hold over you,” Mr. Manual says. His smile is much wider than before. He claps his hands together, trying to change the mood. “Ha! Well, I wasn’t expecting to get so spiritual with you today. Let’s keep going, so we can make lunch in time, yeah?”

“Yes,” Tenya agrees, bowing deeply. He is naïve to think these emotions will disappear after the hero killer was brought to justice. Of course, it will not be so easy. “Thank you for you wisdom, Mr. Manual. I will keep in mind what you told me.”

Tenya raises his head.

A pitch black hand grabs the head of his mentor between muscled fingers.

And as fast as Tenya can blink, Mr. Manual is smashed through a building.

Dust bursts into the air, a massive hole now decorates the convenience storefront to his left. Lights flicker like stunned blinks. The hanging store sign falls to the ground with bits of brick and glass.

A large hand grips the edge of the destruction, cracking the wall under his grip. A person emerges from the rubble.

No, not a person.

A monster.

The monster is a hash of hulking muscle and scarred limbs. Metal plating covers his knees and lower legs. And as Tenya's gaze travels up, nothing stares back at him. This monster has no eyes. No face. The top half of his skull is sawed off, bits of jagged bone lining the cut. A red-pink brain pulses bare and uncovered, running into a strong jaw of sharp, yellow teeth.

The monster tilts his head in Tenya's direction. It trills low and slow.

Tenya's throat constricts, dread gnawing at his sides and prickling his scalp. He cannot think. He cannot fathom what just—he was standing here, learning from his mentor on how to cope with these emotions, and this *thing*—

Is Mr. Manual alive?

The question barely invades Tenya's mind because the monster reaches for him next. The thought of that hand reaching him locks his knees, and he forgets how to run.

A blurred body bathed in green lightning races from behind Tenya. The dust clears around them. And a fist strikes the monster's chest. The monster lurches backwards, soaring into a parked car and setting off a blaring alarm.

Midoriya stands in front of him in civilian clothes; a light jacket and long shorts. His back is a road of tense muscles and bunched shoulders as he stands in front of Tenya. His fists stay raised and ready.

"Midoriya," Tenya manages to whisper. His mind still reeling from moments ago. "What… Why are you here?"

"Why?" Midoriya repeats, his voice wavering slightly. He does not turn around. "Do I need a reason to save my friend?"

The question punches Tenya in the gut.

"I," he starts, but he does not find his words.

Midoriya bombards him with questions.

"What happened? Where'd this guy come from? Are you okay? Can you move?"

"Yes, I'm okay," Tenya says. He is fine. He is okay. Mr. Manual… he needs help.

The monster struggles to detach himself from the car, tearing apart the bent metal as if it were cardboard.

“This villain looks like the same one that attacked Yuuei and injured Mr. Aizawa. I didn’t know there were others like him,” Midoriya notes. “We need to go back to the main road and get help. Here.” Midoriya finally turns to him, and Tenya can see just how scared he is as well. He holds out a sweaty hand.

When had Tenya lost the ability to stand?

“This… what?” Tenya questions, shocked.

The villain who put his homeroom teacher in casts and heavy bandages for weeks on end—this monster is the same as *that* villain? As he glances from Midoriya’s hand to the monster behind him, the words of his classmates come to ridicule him.

“…Did any of you—not Sero, Tokoyami, Uraraka, or I—but anyone else actually see the villain? In action? He was like nothing I’d ever seen before. He moved like some mindless machine…”

“…I don’t know if any of us could’ve moved if we were chased by that villain—Noumu.”

Tenya sucks in a breath. “This *thing* attacked—watch out!”

He takes hold of Midoriya’s hand, and with both feet planted on the ground, he pulls them both out of the way, dashing towards the road. The monster barely misses grabbing his friend, his fingers stabbing into the sidewalk.

“We need to get out of here,” Midoriya says, scrambling to his feet. “I sent a call for help. If we go this way, the pros can meet us halfway!”

A noise of refusal rips from Tenya’s throat.

“No, Mr. Manual is in that building. He’s hurt! He needs—”

The monster rips his fingers from the cracked sidewalk. His head turns in their direction.

Midoriya sprints forward as lightning crackles across his body again. The monster makes a grab for him, but he dodges to the side at the last second. Midoriya jumps back towards him, his fist winding back.

“Six percent. Detroit—” His fist connects with the monster’s chin. “Smash!”

The monster slides backwards, but he does not move as much as before, standing his ground from the force of the punch. He charges for Midoriya, but the boy dives out of the way.

The monster grabs his flailing ankle.

He slams Midoriya into the sidewalk. A broken gasp rips from his friend’s mouth before he starts coughing.

Oh, god, Midoriya is going to—

Incomprehensible words get stuck in Tenya’s throat as he runs forward, forcing his engines in his legs into overdrive. His speed boosts from its explosive power at the last few seconds, and Tenya flies at the monster, driving his leg into his side.

The monster releases Midoriya's foot.

But he barely stumbles from his spot. His kick hardly scrapes him.

Tenya drops back to the ground, his hands trembling as he hooks his arms under Midoriya's armpits and tries to pull him away.

The monster makes a grabs for him, his large hand just moments from crushing Tenya's face.

He is never going to show his brother how much he looks up to him, is he? Never going to quell the worthlessness plaguing his mind and confidently take up the mantle as the turbo hero, Ingenium.

This is it.

Thick shards of ice collide with the monster's side, forcing it back. And as it stumbles, flames engulf its whole body.

Todoroki stands in front of them, consumed by fire and ice.

"Midoriya, you need to text me more info next time," he berates, his tone shrouded in seriousness. "Now, I'm late."

"Todoroki…" Midoriya lifts his head. His eyes are unfocused, and it does not look like shaking his head helps. He lets go of a shaky exhale, struggling to pull himself from Tenya's grasp. "Why're you here?"

Todoroki screws his mouth into a tight frown.

"Why? That's my line. How're you going to share your location with all of your contacts, but with no context?" he questions. He stomps on the ground, and ice shoots out from his boot. It crawls along the sidewalk, along the road, and lashes at the flaming monster.

"You're not the type of person to do something like that with no meaning attached. No, you must've meant, 'Help! I'm in trouble!' "

Todoroki sprints forward as fire dances around his left arm. He throws it at the monster, burning it once more. The surrounding ice melts under the heat of his flames. With it distracted, Midoriya runs up behind it. He propels his body in a flip, gaining momentum from his increased speed, and he aims a tornado kick at the monster's shoulder.

The monster crashes through a different building, whipping up a new cloud of dust.

Midoriya drops to the ground on one knee, his teeth gnashed in pain. His shin looks badly bruised. Todoroki stands by his side.

"That sent it flying, but…" Midoriya trails off as the monster slowly emerges from the crumbling building. It looks a bit singed, a bit dirty, but mainly uninjured. He drags himself up from his knee. "You hit it with fire and ice, and I hit it harder than before."

"Is it getting tougher with each hit?" Todoroki speculates.

"That's what I'm thinking."

“That’s fucking rich. How’re we supposed to fight something that gets stronger from our hits?”

Tenya stands rooted to his spot. His friends—his classmates *he* should be protecting—they stand in front of him, shielding him from the being of mass destruction. As he wavers from regrets and guilt, as he lets fear eat him from the inside out, they protect him. It is like a second punch to the gut.

How can he call himself a hero if he cannot come to his friends’ rescue? His mentor’s rescue?

Tenya curls his hands into fists. They cannot run and leave Mr. Manual in that broken building, but this monster will not give them the time to save him. What can they do? How do they defeat it? How—

“Before Noumu could grab him, Aizawa pulled Bakugou out of the way and was severely injured in the process. Midoriya tried to stop Noumu but failed, and then Bakugou killed Noumu before he could hurt Midoriya.”

“What if…” Tenya starts to suggest as he steps up next to his friends.

“Taking a life does not justify saving one. We don’t get to play god by being heroes.”

Oh, the cruel irony. He swallows against a dry throat. “How did Bakugou kill him?”

Midoriya’s head whips in his direction.

“What?”

“During the villain attack on our class, how did Bakugou kill the one like this?” Tenya tries again.

Todoroki side-eyes him.

“Iida?”

“How!” Tenya snaps, nearly yelling at his friends. “I don’t have any other ideas, and this monster is only getting stronger. I—” He sucks in a sharp breath.

“I’m terrified, Midoriya. I don’t know what else we can do. Tell me, and I’ll do it,” Tenya manages to whisper as he stands in front of them.

“Look out!” Todoroki hurries to say, grabbing Tenya’s shoulder to shove him out of the way.

The monster charges for them. Todoroki throws up a wall of spiked ice. But the monster punches through as if it were fragile, his fist driving into Todoroki’s stomach.

His friend flies backwards.

“No!”

Green lighting discharges into the air as Midoriya pummels his fist into the monster’s chest. The punch has him crashing through the same broken building.

Midoriya’s whole arm bruises far worse than his leg. The limb hangs uselessly.

Tenya runs to check on Todoroki. His body is sprawled on the road. Tenya lifts his head, watching his face scrunch in pain, his hands hovering over his stomach. He is barely conscious.

Tenya's heartbeat is in his ears. He cannot leave Todoroki here, but he cannot leave Midoriya so close to that thing. What is he supposed to do? What would Mr. Manual do?

That damned monster appears from the razed building again, low trilling and clicking sounds erupt from his mouth. He stumbles a bit, and that only makes the trilling louder.

"Come on, damn it!" Midoriya shouts at the monster, raising his fists again.

"Midor—" Tenya hears himself start to say.

The monster runs for his friend, and Tenya's world slows down. His breaths are clipped. He cannot tear his eyes from Midoriya. His friend standing against that thing.

A white and purple blur shoots past Tenya and Todoroki.

They cartwheel through the air, and a mighty kick smashes into the monster's exposed brain, crushing it on impact. The monster crumbles into the pavement, the ground cracking under him. Blood seeps from his head, pooling around the limp body.

He does not move.

The rabbit hero, Miruko, stands above him, staring at him with raised eyebrows.

"Huh. Their heads really are their weak points," Tenya hears her say, almost impressed. She turns to the three of them, quickly assessing their conditions. A frown darkens her features.

She jogs up to Midoriya.

"You Izuku Midoriya?"

The boy straightens up the best he can, one hand cradling his injured arm. His shoulders sag just a bit.

"Y-yes, that's me. How did you…?"

"Your friend convinced me to come here. You're lucky I trusted him after what he pulled last night. He sent me your pinned location the second I got off the train," she says, cracking her knuckles and shaking out her feet. "You all look horrible. Can you move? Can you help him?" She points to Mr. Manual who is now propped against a mailbox. He is out cold. Blood slides from the side of his head, broken bone protrudes from his bruised skin.

They were just having a *conversation*—

Tenya clears his throat, rapidly blinking his eyes as emotions rush to blur his vision.

"Yes, I can, ma'am."

Ms. Miruko does a couple of test hops before turning towards the rising black smoke in the near distance.

“Good. I’m ending this.”

“Wait!” Tenya calls after her in a hurry. He bows his head from his crouched position. “Thank you for saving us. We—I don’t know what would’ve happened if you didn’t come.” His breaths barely escape his mouth, constricted by more than the armor of his hero costume. He pulls his helmet from his head and throws it to the side, cool air attacking the sweat on his face and neck.

A firm hand clasps against his shoulder as Ms. Miruko kneels in front of him.

“Kid, you don’t have to thank me for doing my job.”

._._. **Internship Day 6** ._._.

Over one hundred people, both heroes and civilians, were injured in yesterday’s attack on Hosu City. The areas attacked were severely damaged. Some buildings were completely razed to the ground. Some roads were cracked beyond use. Ms. Miruko and Mr. Endeavor put a stop to the rest of the monsters—*noumus*, if Tenya recalls correctly from his classmates’ discussion.

Five of those noumus stormed the ward.

Tenya rushed Mr. Manual to the closest hospital he could find, Tokyo General. He was in critical condition. The nurses told Tenya he sustained a severe head injury, amongst several broken bones, that resulted in an intracerebral hemorrhage. A brain bleed. He needed immediate surgery to control the bleeding.

The nurses informed him Mr. Manual is in a coma. However, the doctors are hopeful he will wake in the coming days, and Tenya holds onto that piece of hope like a life preserver.

As soon as Tenya brought Mr. Manual to the hospital, he immediately turned back around and brought Todoroki next. He was dazed and bleeding a bit, but according to the nurses, it was surface level bleeding. The noumu broke three of Todoroki’s ribs when he punched him.

Lastly, Tenya rushed Midoriya to the same hospital. The boy was in more pain than he let on during the fight, but the jostling of Tenya’s run almost made him pass out. The bones of Midoriya’s right arm were completely shattered. He had a hairline fracture in his right leg, and he sustained a concussion from when he was slammed into the ground.

And Tenya remains uninjured.

He waits to see Midoriya and Todoroki in the visitor area of Tokyo General hospital, his leg bouncing in his seat. The nurse let him know that their treatments are finished; however, they are in a private meeting. Tenya had a meeting with the Chief of the Hosu Police Department to provide his testimony on what happened earlier today, so he suspects the chief is speaking with his friends now.

The Chief of Police, Mr. Kenji Tsuragamae, really gave him an earful. Tenya knows they should have run away the second they saw the noumu no matter what, but at the same time, he could not bring himself to do so. Not with Mr. Manual in need of emergency medical care.

But he is not a hero, yet. He is only in training. No one told him he could fight. No one gave him the confirmation. So, the actions he took yesterday were acts of vigilantism. He weaponized his quirk outside of the law. Even when faced with an immovable enemy, he committed a violation of the rules of the highest caliber.

And if Mr. Manual were not so injured, he would receive punishment for his lack of guidance on Tenya's behalf.

As Tenya listened to the man, gripping his knees in silence, Mr. Tsuragamae began to let up on his reproach, slipping too many dog puns into his sentences. He understands the position Tenya, Midoriya, and Todoroki were placed in. The battles of heroes are full of quick thinking and fast movements just to stay alive. It is fortunate that the street they fought on was practically empty as people ran to take cover. The number of witnesses was extremely limited.

If Tenya agrees to never talk about what happened, the police and the news media can continue to push Ms. Miruko and Mr. Endeavor, including the flame hero's sidekicks, as the only ones involved yesterday. They have already been briefed on this plan. Their involvement will never see the light of day, and this violation will not affect their careers to become heroes.

But if they were to parade around and brag that, as heroes, they had no choice but to fight and keep the noumu from rampaging and hurting anyone else, it would only fuel the public's current discourse about rising vigilantes and weaponizing quirks above the law. The police and the news need to push the importance of *legal* pro heroes now more than ever.

A nurse lets him know he can see his friends in their shared patient room. As he walks down the hallway, he passes the Chief of Police, nodding his head to the man who lowers his snout in return. But just before he enters Midoriya and Todoroki's room, their voices give him pause.

"Damn mutt," he hears Todoroki huff. "How's he going to yell at us for stepping in? What, were we really supposed to turn tail and run away? To hell with that… Well, I was supposed to come to your rescue, but I ended up being rescued myself. My bad."

"You saved us first! We really were in a pinch back there, and I wasn't even wearing my hero costume. Plus, it's not so bad. I'm more worried of what Gran Torino will do, knowing Mr. Tsuragamae is revoking his teaching license for half of a year…" Midoriya pauses. "Oh, no, Kacchan is going to kill me too."

"What's Bakugou got to do with this?"

"The only reason I was in Hosu was to check on Iida. Kacchan was really against me coming in the first place because he thought I'd get tangled up with the hero killer… But I think an unstoppable noumu is worse," Midoriya explains, groaning a bit. "It wasn't a miracle Ms. Miruko was in Hosu instead of Yokohama. Kacchan convinced her to come. The only person Ms. Miruko could've been referring to yesterday is Kacchan."

"…No one's supposed to know we were involved, right? So, I don't think Miruko's going to rat you out," Todoroki offers. "What mom doesn't know won't kill you."

"Please don't call him that. I'll get nightmares."

Their laughter snaps Tenya from his eavesdropping. How rude of him to listen in on their private conversation! He strides into the room with stiff arms swishing at his sides.

The both of them are dressed in hospital gowns. Todoroki is littered in patches of bandages, covering scrapes and bruises. A thin layer of bandages wraps around his torso. Midoriya's right arm is set in a cast while his right leg is wrapped in bandages and elevated by a couple of pillows.

He clears his throat.

"Oh, Iida, glad you're okay," Midoriya says.

"Thanks for getting us to the hospital, man. I couldn't even see straight after that bastard punched me," Todoroki says, touching his ribs gingerly.

Tenya bites the inside of his cheek.

How can they look at him and smile like that? Thank him even though he let them get so injured on his behalf? Midoriya was not supposed to be in the area. Todoroki should have stayed with Mr. Endeavor where he was safer.

He drops his head, bowing deeply to his friends.

"I'm indebted to the both of you. You risked your lives for me. I'm so sorry that you got involved."

He glances up nervously when the room goes quiet. Midoriya and Todoroki look at him strangely.

"You stopped talking to me, Iida, and *that* scared me. You've been carrying so much pain by yourself, and you wouldn't let Uraraka or I help at all. How was I supposed to ignore that?" Midoriya says, enunciating his words as if Tenya has a hard time understanding. "I was only visiting, but did you really think I was going to run away when I saw that noumu reaching for you?"

"I wasn't going to leave you two alone. What kind of hero would I be if I did that?" Todoroki asks, incredulous.

This is it. The third punch to his gut.

"Oh…" Tenya whispers, exhaling a shaky breath. He takes off his glasses and rubs his misty eyes.

They were such simple words—the words Midoriya said to him. The words his friends reiterate, beat onto him like a drum. And on a subconscious level, Tenya already knew that.

"Do I need a reason to save my friend?"

A hero is a person who saves another no matter what the circumstances. A person who reaches out a hand to a lost child. A person who is selfless, not selfish, and definitely not wrapped in his own personal crusade.

Blinded by rage and anger, he wanted the hero killer to pay for his crimes so badly, he nearly tainted his brother's name. And, consistently, the people around him (his friends and his mentor) have tried to tell him that this course of action will not put his mind or his heart at ease.

If he wants to let the hero killer and the world know Ingenium has not fallen, then he should become the hero he aspires to be. To not have the speed to put a man six feet under sooner, but the speed to put a scared civilian at ease sooner, so they know they do not need to cower in fear. A hero is here.

He should thank that vigilante, Ground Zero, for preventing him from making the biggest mistake of his life.

A new purpose, possibly even a new old purpose, sets him upright again, pushing him forward one track at a time.

Tenya apologizes again, rubbing at the tears that will not stop flowing from his eyes, relief and ease pooling the hole in his heart.

“I have a lot to learn, but I promise, I will be a hero that will make my brother proud. I will remember this internship for the rest of my life.”

Midoriya nods his head in understanding. He looks down at his right arm and the scars lining his hand.

“Me too… The way I am… This internship put a lot of thoughts in my head. I still have a lot to learn, so let’s become stronger together. Okay?”

._._. **Internship Day 7** – Katsuki’s POV ._._.

Katsuki stabs the omelette rice on his metal food tray in tune with the involuntary twitch of his right eye. The stupid thing has not stopped twitching since he woke up today. If this twitch does not annoy him into an early grave, sitting in this hospital bed might.

Since the fight with Stain, Katsuki underwent two major surgeries. The first surgery happened as soon as he was brought to Yokohama Rosai hospital to stabilize him and treat the multiple stab wounds and gashes. The second surgery happened yesterday to fix the nerve damage in his right arm and leg. The doctor who pulled him off of the street, Dr. Kenko Ota, called in a favor from a specialist friend to do the second treatment. He is grateful for her kindness these past two days.

Miruko and Dr. Ota have been keeping his existence in this hospital under wraps. He was admitted as Dr. Ota’s distant relative for completely different injuries. Only a select few nurses and doctors were briefed on what happened and his connection to the never-ending buzz of the fight. To the outside world, Katsuki has been carrying out his internship business as usual.

Katsuki sits back in his bed, placing his chopsticks on the tray. He has been in and out of consciousness so many times, he has not had the time to digest everything that happened. Let us review the facts: (1) he fought the hero killer; (2) Firecracker nearly died; (3) he used his quirk out of anger; and (4) Miruko knows he is a vigilante.

On the bright side, he avoided getting abducted.

He has yet to talk to Miruko about everything. When he woke up, by some miracle or curse at five AM, he ignored the elephant in the room to address a growing concern gnawing at his toes. It was too peaceful in Yokohama after his fight with Stain, and that did not feel right. Something felt unfinished to his half-delirious mind.

And then it hit him. There was more to the attack at Hosu documented in the future Genius archives. Endeavor dealt with more than Stain. He dealt with noumus too. It was a joint attack between the hero killer and the Villain Alliance.

So, if they had not wreaked havoc on Yokohama, where the hell were they?

The last thing he wanted was Midoriya fighting a fucking noumu or two because he wanted to visit his friend. And his hunch was right. Shigaraki still attacked Hosu, regardless of where Stain was arrested.

To make matters worse, right before the nurse started preparing him for his second surgery, he received a text message from Midoriya. It was empty except for one detail. His pinned location.

What the fuck.

The nurse was wrenching his phone from his left hand when he forwarded the message to Miruko. It could have been a butt dial or a mistake or something trivial, but Katsuki was not going to take the chance. Not with that boy's shit luck.

It turns out it was trivial. Miruko texted him back hours later that Midoriya's phone has been glitching lately, sending random texts to all of his contacts, and Endeavor and his sidekicks were dealing with all of the noumus in contained areas.

The sliding door to his room opens.

"Good to see you alive and kicking!" Miruko exclaims. She is in a sweatsuit with her travel backpack slung over her shoulder; her long, white hair is pulled back into a ponytail and baseball cap.

She is leaving.

"Yeah, well. Been through worse, I guess," Katsuki answers with a shrug.

Miruko frowns at that. She pulls the other strap of her backpack over her shoulder. "I can't stay. I put off a drug bust in Miyagi," she says; the "for you" is silent. "But I didn't want to leave until I knew your parent could come."

"My parent," Katsuki repeats carefully.

"Called your mom. Nice lady! I let her know a villain takedown went sour, and you got caught in the crossfire. She's on her way," she explains. "There's a nurse stationed in the lobby, so she'll bring your mom up, no questions asked."

Katsuki sighs audibly, tilting his head back and staring at the ceiling. Handling his mother is not what he wants to do today. But he assumes someone has to discharge him and drag his ass back home.

"Great."

Miruko regards him for a moment, swaying from one foot to the other before cocking her hip out.

"Look. I think you've done some impressive things as Ground Zero. Illegal… but impressive! Though, the matter still stands. You could've been killed the other night, kid."

"Possibly," he settles on. Stain had multiple opportunities to kill him. He would know. He allowed them to happen. "But that wasn't his objective. He wanted to… recruit me. I think he wanted

someone to continue his duty if he did fall to a ‘fake’ hero—as he’d put it. Either way, he wasn’t trying to kill me, so he held back. And that’s why he lost.”

He sighs.

“Not only that, but if Firecracker didn’t show up, I wouldn’t be here either,” he says.

She hums noncommittedly, crossing her arms.

“Well, uh, I don’t need to nag you if you’re already reflecting,” Miruko notes. She pauses, taking in his appearance.

“Obviously, I don’t plan on ratting you out. But you should quit this vigilante business,” she advises. “Putting your life on the line like this… Do it when you’re actually a pro. When you have enough experience under your belt. When you *know* you’re the best version of yourself. That way, when the time comes to put your life on the line against a villain, you can do it without regrets.”

“I’m not going to blackmail you, or force you to stop. I don’t control your life, kid. If you want to sneak around at night, whatever. But I thought I’d give you something to think about while you’re at it,” she says, looking him straight in the eyes. “Don’t squash your future before you get to see it.”

Miruko stretches upward. A smile gracing her face again. “I’m off to catch my train. Wish we could part on better terms.” She walks to the door, sliding it open. She looks back. “How about next time, we do just that? Maybe choose a hero name you actually like by then, yeah?”

·–·–·

The door to his room slams into the wall.

Mitsuki stands at the entrance with her hand still on the doorframe. Her shoulders are bunched to her ears, and her chest heaves with each breath.

“Katsuki. Bakugou.”

She zeroes in on Katsuki, nostrils flared.

“Uh—”

“Shut up,” Mitsuki snaps at him. She glances at the poor nurse standing stock-still next to Katsuki. She tries her hardest to smile, but it comes off strained and daunting. “Would you mind giving us a little space?”

Mitsuki shuts the door once the nurse finally scurries from the room. It falls quiet, except for the low beeps of the heart monitor.

She closes the distance between them, rounding the bed with darting eyes. Her hands are a gentle flurry over his skin, cupping his face and smoothing her thumbs over his cheekbones. She brings her head to his, pressing her forehead into his hair, and she sighs a strained breath of relief.

And as quick as the gesture settles, she shoves him back into the headboard.

Mitsuki totters to the comfy chair across the room, falling into the seat and burying her head in her hands.

“What do you expect from me, Katsuki?” she says, just barely higher than a whisper.

“I don’t—” Katsuki starts to protest, but his mother snaps her head up, her eyes seething.

“I told you to shut the fuck up,” she threatens, but as soon as the words leave her mouth, it screws shut like she made a mistake. She puts her head back into her hands, shaking it lightly.

As Katsuki counts the low beeps of the heart monitor, his mother stays quiet for a long time.

She sighs.

“You wanted to be a pro hero for as long as I can remember. You were so obsessed with how All Might looked after he won his battles, you would mimic his faces in the bathroom mirror for hours on end. And I thought it was cute, you know? My little gremlin of a son wanted to be a hero.

“When you got your quirk, you turned into a new type of headache. The little explosions were annoying enough, but you wouldn’t shut up about what kind of hero you wanted to be. Talked for hours about what your hero agency would be like; had debates with little Izuku and those other boys about what sidekicks they’d be; brainstormed your hero name with your father. My *god* you wouldn’t shut up.

“It always frustrated me how your teachers fawned over everything you did since your quirk manifested. It gave you that big head. That conceited attitude,” Mitsuki says, quieting again. Katsuki can see the quirk of her lips even with her head in her hands.

“But even I couldn’t deny it. My stupid son was gifted. You wanted to be a big shot hero, so I supported your dream. But I wasn’t blind to the dangers of this career. I read and watch the news all of the time, Katsuki. I see how fast these promising heroes fall to despicable villains. I didn’t want to be scared, though. I didn’t want to be the mother who is riddled with worry and fear that I’d have to bury my son.

“Fear is a bitch, isn’t it? No matter how much I wished it away, it still manifested in other ways. I started thinking that if you stayed at the top of your classes, extracurriculars, health… then you’d have a better chance to not end up like those heroes. Your teachers praised your perfection, but I demanded it. Craved it. I told myself, as long as you were the best, as long as you won, then you’d be okay. Because that way, I know you’re still alive. That way, I know I won’t lose my son.

“The sludge villain killed my deluded little fantasy. Suddenly, my son can’t sleep well. He withdraws more. He lies to me. He can’t go five *fucking* minutes without acquiring a mysterious injury. God, the broken ankle was bad enough. And now *this*? Why do I have to hear *days* later from your field mentor that you had two major surgeries for *stab wounds*? How do you expect me to handle that?” his mother asks, pleading for answers he cannot provide.

Katsuki does not speak. He has not heard his mother talk this much since the day he returned from his university fellowship. The tone of her voice brings him back to the dinner table with his parents, his mother’s head bowed in a similar fashion to this. He swallows thickly.

Mitsuki takes a sharp breath before standing up again. She looks into his wide eyes with glossy ones.

“This is it. I’m done, and so are you. I can’t see you like this anymore.”

Anxiety tickles Katsuki's chest in mocking anticipation. He can guess what she is trying to say, and yet, he does not want to.

"Mom, what're you say—"

"I'm pulling you from that school."

Katsuki straightens up in his bed like he bounded off a springboard. The words of rebuttal tear from his lips before he can think.

"The *hell* you are."

A stunned laugh leaves his mother's mouth.

"Excuse me?"

"You can't do that. You *just* said this is my dream. Why the fuck would you pull me from Yuuei?"

"Look at you!" Mitsuki screams, shoving her hands in his direction. "You're wasting away in a hospital bed before my eyes! If you keep this up, you're going to get yourself killed!"

"Ha! News flash! 90% of the shit I'd do as a pro will try to kill me. This is unavoidable!"

"I know! I know this! I just didn't grasp I'd have to *see* you like this. I thought you would be better!"

"Fuck you!"

"Don't curse at me!"

Heavy breaths fill the air between them as they stare each other down. Katsuki from his bandages and white bedsheets. Mitsuki from her stiff stance and shaking fists.

Katsuki tears his eyes from his mother, taking deep breaths to calm down.

She cannot pull him from Yuuei. He needs to get his provisional license, no matter how much longer it may take him when he finishes his potential mission. He needs to graduate from Yuuei, and then from university. He needs to join the Genius Office. Being a pro hero is a part of him he cannot let go no matter what.

Even more so, he needs to track Midoriya's progress and make sure he does not get himself killed. He needs to make sure he does not take on the weight of the world by himself. That he surrounds himself with friends that will share his burden, so he does not suffer as the man Katsuki knows.

"I-I know," Katsuki says. "I know I'm not a very good hero or son. But—" He chokes on his words, turning his head back to his mother and staring at her hurt face before bowing his head.

"Don't take me out of Yuuei. I will be better. I promise."

His mother's hands circle his shoulders, and the bed dips slightly to his side.

"Katsuki, it's not enough," Mitsuki says in a small voice. "I can't trust your words."

“One more chance. That’s all I need. I’ll do anything.”

“Katsuki…”

“Please.”

His mother breaks. Her cry seizes his heart and squeezes it to nothingness.

“I…” Mitsuki trails off through a cracked voice. “I never want to see you like this again.”

“Okay,” Katsuki agrees.

“No more lying. I *know* when you’re lying.”

“Okay.”

“I want to see you at breakfast and dinner every day.”

“Okay.”

“And you’re going to start seeing Ms. Chiyo this coming Tuesday, right?”

“Yes.”

“Just… please talk to me too. I need to know what you’re thinking too.”

“Okay.”

His mother tightens her arms around him.

._._.

Katsuki’s Events Notebook

1. *Sludge villain incident [added: Deku gets OFA]*
2. *Yuuei entrance exams [added: waste of time]*
3. *Graduated middle school*
4. *[added: Shigaraki attacks the class]*
5. *Did I win the Sports Festival my first year? [added: doesn’t matter anymore]*
6. *[added: fought with Stain during field internship—new]*
7. *Kidnapped by League of Extras [added (revised): this happened over summer break, didn’t it]*
8. *The War for All ends [added: I need to destroy it]*
9. *Graduated high school*
10. *Future heroes fellowship stationed in India and China*
11. *Returned to Japan*
12. ...

Chapter End Notes

I totally ran out of steam at the end there lol.
If you want me to leave you a chirp from Stain’s roast account, let me know :)

Gotta give your feet some gravity to get you grounded

Chapter Notes

Last time, Katsuki clashes with Stain one last time, and secrets slip into the light as he reigns victorious. Iida struggles with his emotions, and he is pulled into a battle with a noumu alongside Midoriya and Todoroki. The field internships end.

This is a filler chapter of sorts. I've written that Katsuki takes Sundays off, so I wrote about a few of them. A calm chapter. Song title is from "Sunday Best" by Surfaces. Flashback scene is from the year 2028.

I'm estimating five/six more chapters of this section.

I started a Spotify playlist with the songs I've used in this fic here.

Tentative Chapter 16 Post Date: December 1, 2021

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Sunday #1** ._._.

Katsuki lies face down on his bed, unmoving. As the natural light filtering into his room brightens and dims, he shifts once. His arm fell numb.

._._. **Sunday #2** ._._.

Katsuki lets out a heavy exhale as he reaches the viewing area at top of the mountain. He wipes the sweat from his brow, from the back of his neck, and takes a seat on the rickety, wooden bench.

The journey to the summit was quite pleasant, especially since he left early this morning to make a day of it. The auntie at the convenience store packed him an extra sandwich when he told her where he was going on such a beautiful Sunday.

He sets his new day backpack on the bench, stretching in his seat, and he looks out at the horizon. He rarely had time to enjoy the outdoors with his demanding job—he would not have it any other way. And yet…

Breathtaking.

The neighboring mountains reveal themselves at the peak of this one. The colorful leaves, shades of green and pink and orange and red, sweep from the mountaintop down to the valley. A couple of cable cars slowly travel along the black lines from the bustling towns below. The sunlight blankets each and every little building and moving car.

And for a moment, the wicked wind stops blowing, the crawling cloud stops the sun from beating on the back of his neck, and the mountaintop sinks into motionless serenity.

A wistful smile graces his lips as he remembers the last time he climbed this particular mountain years into the future. The miniscule differences in the nature. In the carved names on the bench. In his trek. His heart thuds slow in the cage of his chest.

It was a peaceful trip, really. Eijirou has always been a great hiking buddy. But it was too much too fast after Katsuki returned to Japan. He should have realized that. He sighs, and an excerpt of the past plays in his mind.

"Hey! Look! Something took a massive shit over here."

"Don't poke it, you idiot. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

His question is ignored in favor of curiosity.

"Is it a macaque?"

"...Maybe a serow?"

"Oh! I've never seen one. Maybe it's still around here. This looks super fresh."

"Don't bother it, Kiri."

"I just want to see."

"It probably ditched anyway. You know. When you punched that fucking tree to death."

"Oops."

Katsuki laughs. " 'Oops,' he says!"

"It was an accident. I swear!" Eijirou defends, laughing as well.

He turns to take in the stunning view they spent hours hiking to see. It would have taken less time, but they kept stopping at every little thing, weaving around the mountain like children on an adventure. As he calms, a disheartened smile takes over.

"I'm glad we got to do this again. It's been forever. I'm glad, but..." Eijirou's words trail into silence. Their meaning still fills the air.

"I'm sorry," Katsuki says quietly.

"You could've told me. Or anyone, really, that you were leaving."

"I know."

"Do you understand how I felt? How I feel? Do you care?"

"I do now," Katsuki answers. "That's all I can really give you."

Eijirou turns to him, and the sunlight streaming on his back makes his scarlet hair nearly glow.

“Then, you get this is all I can really give you too,” Eijirou says carefully. “It’s not because you left, Bakugou. It’s because you disappeared. I need some time.”

Katsuki closes his eyes.

“Yeah.”

._._. **Sunday #3** – Kyouka’s POV ._._.

Kyouka holds her takeaway tea tighter between her fingers. She sits on a glossy barstool at a small table next to the large windows of the café. Her shoulders are hunched slightly, crowding in on herself as she stares at the bustling movie theater across the street.

This should not be such a big deal. Many people go to the movies alone. Get a grip, Kyouka.

Momo was supposed to meet her at Charmy’s Café a few minutes ago to chat over tea before heading to the romance movie that came out, “Mountains Between Us.” However, a family issue came up, and she had to cancel. Honestly, she spent longer consoling Momo over the missed movie than walking to the café.

She would not consider watching it alone at all if it were not the last possible day to see it. Musutafu Movies is the only theater close enough where it is still playing.

Kyouka takes a sip of her tea, letting the teaspoon of “Bolstering Boldness” she added to her beverage slip down her throat and swirl in her stomach. It helps, but she still feels her nerves tickle at the backs of her ears.

“Come *on*, Kyouka,” she mutters to herself. She has no problem sitting in this café by herself. She enjoys perusing music stores alone—prefers it. Bookstores are best explored at her own leisure. So, why does she pause at the movies?

She almost wished they invited Mina, Ochako, or Tsuyu, but they had made the plans so spontaneously, they forgot about their other friends, and it would have been rude to spring this trip on them yesterday. Especially with everyone on edge about the sport’s festival coming up.

She takes another sip of her tea.

She *really* wants to see this movie.

Because who could resist the tumultuous tale of Mei? The princess is stripped from her title and forced to run from the castle after the assassination of her father, the emperor. She hides from the corrupted palace soldiers out for her head. On the run, she meets Jianyu, the scrappy blacksmith’s son who falls in love, but hides his feelings, and protects her as they travel. A historical fantasy romance with a surprise twist—she *cannot* miss this movie. It feeds her gushy romance cravings in the best way.

Kyouka would not have known of the movie if it were not for Momo’s excitement. She wishes she never learned of its existence.

She sighs, barely registering the familiar explosion of spiky blonde hair obscuring one of the framed posters on the wall of movies now playing.

She does a doubletake.

“Ah!” she exclaims, nearly jumping from her seat and jabbing a finger in the direction of her classmate. She garners a few stares of the other patrons in the café. A light blush splays across her cheeks as she excuses herself from the café, downing the rest of her tea and throwing it into the outside trashcan.

Her body moves before she fully thinks through her plan, speed-walking across the street. She can consider Bakugou her friend, right? They exchange words at the start of each class or whisper quips when the teacher’s back is facing them.

Ever since high school started, he did not act like he wanted to get close to anyone in their class with his intense glares and standoffishness. But sitting next to him on the bus ride to the practical training area changed that. She did not expect him to be… easy to talk to?

And he is not as closed off as she originally thought. Not with how familiar Midoriya speaks of him, or how much Kirishima started talking to him after the villain attack.

But he talks to her, so she is not making a mistake, right?

She taps his shoulder.

It is like when she touched a rollie pollie with a stick as a kid, and the bug curled into itself, disturbed to its core. Bakugou’s entire body bunches, fingers slowly curling into fists, the muscles in his shoulders tighten.

The look in his eyes when he finally turns in her direction makes her feel small. And her decision to bother him seems like the biggest mistake she made in years. Though, as fast as the dangerous glare sears her, he blinks, and it is gone along with the tightness of his shoulders.

“Oh. Jirou,” he says. “You scared the shit out of me.”

That was Bakugou *scared*?

“I lost two years off my life because you were scared?” she asks incredulously.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she changes the subject. “What’re you doing?”

He gestures to the movie theater.

“Pretty self-explanatory, isn’t it?”

“You’re such a joy on a Sunday afternoon, Bakugou,” Kyouka remarks sarcastically. “Who hurt you today?”

“No one. I chose this,” he answers, the corner of his mouth quirking up. “Aren’t you meeting someone?”

Kyouka shakes her head.

“I was, but they had to cancel… Are you?” she probes.

Annoyance hoods his eyes, and he lets silence draw out between them.

“Guess.”

She narrows her eyes.

“I know four people who would *love* to see a movie with your lonely self,” she threatens.

“You *wouldn't*,” he says.

“I have Mina’s number saved to my favorites. Try me.”

Kyouka levels Bakugou’s glare with one of her own.

He breaks first. With his involuntary snort, the two of them start snickering.

“All right, I’ll stop being an asshole,” he relents.

“Thanks,” she says with a smile, pointing at the poster for the romance movie. “This starts in about twenty minutes. Want to see it together?”

“Mountains Between Us?” he reads, squinting his eyes a bit.

“It’s a historical fantasy. Every review I’ve seen online has been nothing but praise.”

“Yeah, I bet,” he agrees, a hand to his chin. “I think it won awards.”

“Huh?”

“Will win. Critics think it will win awards,” he corrects, hurriedly. With no warning, he starts towards the entrance of the movie theaters. “Are you coming?”

·_·_·

Amazing. Simply amazing. Not only did the plot have her on the edge of her seat the whole time, but the musical score was also well done. The scene under the ginkgo tree with the golden leaves fluttering around them, and Jianyu takes Mei’s hands in his—Kyouka could have screamed from the feelings that welled inside of her as the erhu started playing.

Momo is going to hate her because she is sure to blab about all of her favorite parts the minute she lays eyes on her friend.

She whips her head towards Bakugou as they walk the route to the closest train station.

“So?” she edges him on with bright eyes.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I forgot how… it was so good,” he says, cutting his eyes in her direction. “If my eyes were misty, so were yours.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” she snickers. “The score was beautiful. I want to learn some of the pieces on the piano, but there’s no time right now.”

“Right, I forgot your family is a bunch of musical artists.”

“Yes?” Jirou answers in almost a questioning tone. “My dad’s a bit of a rocker and composes pieces, and my mom loves punk, but does classical too.”

“And you?”

“I like all genres of music, but I guess I take after my parents’ love for punk and rock a little bit more.”

“Hm.”

“Do you play an instrument?”

“Drums,” Bakugou says.

“Drum sets are fun. I started when I was little, and then I moved to acoustic guitar, but my dad got me into electric guitars pretty quickly after that,” Kyouka explains, nostalgia filling her heart at the memory of her first electric guitar. “I taught myself on the keyboard a few years ago. I know it sounds like a lot, but really, this is all just a hobby of mine.”

“Wow,” Bakugou says, and she can hear the amazement in his voice. “Are you going keep at it after Yuuei? Like how Mic has a radio show?”

Kyouka pauses at that. She never really thought about what she would do with this hobby of hers in the future. Creating songs, strumming lazily on the guitar, or jamming out with her family… she never thought about sharing her hobby beyond that. Her plan was always to be a hero.

“I don’t know,” she finally says.

He shrugs. “That’s fine. You don’t need to figure out your whole life at this moment.”

The conversation carries from the movie to class assignments to Kaminari’s belief people have six senses because of a Hollywood movie title. And it is easy, surprisingly. The conversations Kyouka usually holds with Bakugou last a few minutes tops. She can joke around him, but she never expected their relationship to move past acquaintances. It is nice.

“Well, we’re here,” Kyouka notes as they reach the stairs of the train station. “Which one are you taking?”

“I’m not. I live close enough. I’ll walk,” he says, stopping at the top of the stairs.

“Oh.” Kyouka furrows her eyebrows. “Um, see you at school then.”

Bakugou returns an over-the-shoulder wave as he walks away.

Maybe it is the remnants of her tea or the fact that she has moved into friend territory, but Kyouka finds herself turning around and climbing back up the stairs.

“Bakugou!” she calls after him. He freezes, turning around in confusion. Her earphone jacks tap together in slight embarrassment. “Let’s do this again?”

He raises his eyebrows in surprise, opening his mouth to speak, only for the words to get caught in his throat. Kyouka thinks it is the first time she witnessed this. Bakugou is full of sly and judgmental scowls and smirks, but the genuine smile that settles on his face is new to her.

“All right.”

Chapter End Notes

Note A: Charmy’s Café is run by Charmy who has a quirk that can imbue feelings into food and beverage items. So, Kyouka’s teaspoon of “Bolstering Boldness” is actually a teaspoon of honey imbued with feeling bold or brave. I liked the idea, so I expect to use this café again in the future.

Note B: The human trafficking chase happened the next day (night) after the movie.

You’re the queen of the superficial, how long before you tell the truth

Chapter Notes

Last time, we saw how Bakugou enjoys a few of his Sundays off. And in the last connected chapter, Class 1-A ended their field internships amiss a vigilante battle (Yokohama) and noumu attack (Hosu). Iida relearned what it means to be a hero.

Did I finish and upload this during work hours because of a comment? Yes.

Song title is from “Supermassive Black Hole” by Muse. Reworked chapter seven (USJ attack). Updated other parts of the fic. You don’t need to reread it. If there are typos in here, you didn’t see them. I’ll try to stick to monthly updates.

Chapter 17 Post Date: February 14, 2022 [changed a major plot point on a whim]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **BREAKING NEWS** ._._.

Feeling Inspired? Villain Alliance Attacks Hosu as Tribute

Tokyo News

Around eight AM yesterday morning, five villains instigated a large-scale disturbance in Hosu. Including those with minor injuries, 107 people were wounded. The damage to the ward was extensive.

All five villains lacked address and family registry information. Based on the appearance of the villains provided by civilian photos and videos, some suggest they may be connected to the Villain Alliance that attacked Yuuei high school last month.

Speculation places the Hosu villain attack as a response from the Villain Alliance for the arrest of one of the nation’s most wanted criminals: Chizome Akaguro or “Stain.” Having struck across all corners of the country, the apprehension of the man who murdered 17 heroes comes as a relief to all of Japan. It was the biggest killing spree by a solo criminal since All Might’s debut, and the name “Hero Killer Stain” left its mark on history.

The villains were defeated through the combined efforts of the flame hero Endeavor and the rabbit hero Miruko. Endeavor and Miruko are worthy of praise once again.

However, the Villain Alliance is still at large. What will they do next? …

Roasted Rabbit! Miruko Under Fire

Musutafu Times

Many have speculated the actions that occurred on that fateful night in Yokohama and the following morning in Hosu. However, one thing is true: rabbit hero Miruko was present at both events. Miruko was discharged to the scene in Yokohama to apprehend Hero Killer Stain. Then, she appears in the heat of the Hosu villain attack.

Is this a coincidence, or did Miruko obtain information from Stain on attacks planned to happen the following day? If so, how come there were no precautions taken before the Hosu villain attack? Did the rabbit hero keep the connection between villains a secret?

We tried to reach out to Miruko for comment, but as a hero constantly on the move, she is difficult to track down. …

._._. **Katsuki's POV** ._._.

A heaviness haunts him.

It presses against his eyelids. It drags each breath. It immobilizes his limbs. Leaving him lying awake and sedated in his bed, staring at his bare ceiling. As the sun rises for the day, the weight stops him from following in suit.

Katsuki raises his hand towards his window, stretching out his fingers. Rays of sunlight weave through the spaces between them, illuminating the clearness of his nails and warming the skin around his shielded eyes. The sun tries to warm the heaviness, to lighten it, but it fails.

Katsuki exhales slowly. The palms of his hands press against his eyelids, trying to counter the weight in his body with a stronger one. The dull rhythm of his heart beats against his eyelids.

Someone softly knocks on his door.

"What?" The grogginess of waking grinds the question through his throat, and his lip curls at the sound of his voice. His father opens the door, peeking his head into the room.

"Morning, Katsuki," Masaru greets. His mustache is a bit overgrown, his eyes puffy. Katsuki wonders if his work is demanding too much again. His father smiles, but there is a crease in his brow. "It's been a while since I've come to wake you."

True. By the time the sun graces his bedroom, Katsuki would have completed his six-mile run and cool-down stretches, dressed in his school uniform, and prepared his lunch. Can he blame this oddity in his schedule on the heaviness as well?

The smell of his mother's cooking wafts through the door uninvited.

Katsuki forces himself out of the bed. He does not wish to entertain this feeling, nor does he wish to answer his father's worrying demeanor.

"I was awake," Katsuki finally answers. He drags his feet to the bathroom. "You can tell her I'll be down in thirty."

His bedroom door closes with a soft click. He places his hands on the cool enamel of the sink, leaning onto the material. A sharp twinge of pain seers his right arm, and he pulls back, curling his hand. The neurologist did the best she could on his arm and leg, but there was a bit of lasting nerve

damage from the stabbings. Every flex of his hand is slightly out of sync with what he intends to do.

How many times will he make excuses for his behavior? He cannot tell his secrets because they will not understand. He cannot ask for help because they will be hurt. He abided by these delusions, and everything went to shit anyways.

Miruko discovered his vigilantism. She had every right to unmask him and bring him to the police. Every right to take away his chances of becoming a pro hero again. And yet, she did not expose him. She worked with the doctor to hide him from the public and treat his wounds.

Katsuki confronted Stain by himself. He decided to fight the mass murderer in a physical battle of speed and strength with no intention of using his quirk. He decided to block Stain from ever reaching Hosu a second time—ever reaching Midoriya or Iida. And yet, someone still got hurt. Firecracker could have died.

If Katsuki were not in this body, not in this past, would he have done the same thing?

No.

If Dynamight had intel on the whereabouts and actions of the hero killer, he would have worked with Best Jeanist to put together an ambush team. He would bait the man with the knowledge of a ‘fake’ hero patrolling in dark alleyways and dimly lit roads. He would have the police on standby and heroes waiting in the shadows.

Then, why did he act the way he did?

Because he was afraid of Midoriya’s rashness and his inability to think rationally if his friends are in imminent danger? He cannot put all of the blame on fear. Regret prickles the back of his neck—but not for fighting Stain—for the way he handled the situation. Stupidity does not negate rashness. He cannot act like a reckless child gambling his life away.

Katsuki stares at his hands.

They should be larger. The palms of his hands should be rougher—the skin should be thicker, more calloused—from increased use of his quirk. He should be older. Wiser. He is smarter than this. He knows he is smarter than this.

So, why does it feel like the Red Yaksha’s punch reverted more than his physical appearance the longer he stays in the past?

No.

He cannot place the blame on someone who does not exist yet.

Katsuki breathes deeply.

He will not make it downstairs in thirty minutes if he stews in his mistakes. And then he will have to answer to his overbearing mother.

Katsuki smacks his face a couple of times, and red stains his cheeks.

Get it together.

Stain is being transferred to Tartarus. The hero killer is gone. And if he arrives to school early enough, Recovery Girl may be able to fix his lingering nerve damage. Though, this time, he will not forget the events behind his healed arm and leg. They are a reminder that he cannot do this alone.

The heaviness melds into his bones.

._._.

"What are you doing?" his mother asks in a clipped tone. Katsuki pauses on the staircase.

"You told me to come downstairs," he answers, raising an eyebrow.

"No. Why are you wearing *that*?" Mitsuki clarifies and waves her hand at his school uniform. "You're not going to school."

They stare at each other for a moment as the cogs in Katsuki's head sputter and churn.

"You *said* I can stay at Yuuei," he recalls, drawing out his sentence in growing frustration.

His mother rolls her eyes at his tone.

"I know what I said, Katsuki. But I picked you up from the hospital *yesterday*. You're not going to school. Today, you're resting. I already called your school and let them know you'll be absent," she explains.

"I don't need rest."

"What did I say about lying to me?" his mother snaps. She looks him dead in the eye, and Katsuki feels the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "Now, come here."

"You can't just… I'm going to school," he tries again.

"No, you're not. How much rice do you want?" she asks.

"Two bowls. I could miss critical information about class. Do you want me to fall behind?"

"Your teacher will set aside your work. Grab the napkins."

Katsuki slaps the napkins onto the table. He sucks in a harsh breath, a line of profanities on the tip of his tongue, but his mother beats him to the punch.

"Shut up, sit down, and eat."

His jaw clenches hard enough to pop.

He sits down.

._._. **Fumikage's POV** ._._.

Fumikage thinks it was the removable boot on Bakugou's foot during the Yuuei Sports Festival that planted suspicions in his mind. It was an innocent conspiracy theory. A funny thought, really.

That Katsuki Bakugou could be the vigilante of Musutafu, Ground Zero.

The whole class knew Bakugou was prohibited from participating in the sports festival because of his involvement in the villain attack on their class. However, Fumikage is not sure everyone had the chance to pass a limping Bakugou in the arena hallways. They did not speak as they passed each other by. Bakugou looked to be inside of his head anyways, a hunch in his back and an absurd look that promised death on his face.

It was a simple observation clouded by his deep dive into Ground Zero's endeavors six days prior. *Oh*, he thought, *they are both injured in the same places again*. Just like with the first day of school and the Night Stalker Incidents. Fumikage had chuckled at his thoughts. If Bakugou keeps this up, he really will be a secret vigilante.

Fumikage stares a hole into his desk.

It does not take a genius to connect Bakugou's explosion quirk to the explosion from Ground Zero's hand. Or their eerily similar fighting styles. Or the blonde hair. The red eyes. The matching silhouettes.

But it does take a fan to think his fellow classmate could be breaking one of the fundamental laws of being a hero.

Fumikage knew he wanted to be an underground hero ever since he learned the career was an option. His favorite heroes are all underground heroes. And, of course, he is an active member of *underwatch*, the sub-heroddit for lesser known and unknown heroes. But there is a key difference between admiring underground heroes versus admiring vigilantes, and Mr. Aizawa made that distinction clear during the last class debate.

Yet, Fumikage found himself obsessed with the heroic acts of a vigilante. He cannot pinpoint when his simple interest in a mysterious do-gooder turned into a deep appreciation. Keeping up with the acts of vigilantes is something he has done since middle school. While his ex-classmates gossiped about hero tabloids, he stuck his lone beak into the *uncannyvigilante* sub-heroddit. It was a good way to spend the lunch hour or self-study periods.

But he knew scrolling through *uncannyvigilante* threads was just a small interest. In the grand scheme of things, vigilantes are frowned upon. Some can be highly dangerous to the general public and themselves. This small interest, this hobby reading of his, should have never escalated to this extent.

But Ground Zero is different. He makes an impact on the type of crime most underground heroes are known for stopping, but most popular heroes never see. He makes the civilian walking home alone at midnight feel safe and seen.

How could Fumikage *not* get sucked into such a character? Get sucked into his rise in popularity in the city and surrounding areas?

His classmates filter into the room, small groups gravitating towards each other and chatter filling the air. The field internships have ended, and every one is interested in the progress the others have made.

"Good morning," Kouda greets in barely a whisper as he sits down. He would miss this greeting if he did not expect it every day.

“Kouda,” he says, nodding at his classmate. He crosses his arms. “How was your week?”

No matter the similarities between Bakugou and the vigilante that gained his respect, they are still suspicions until he confirms them. It is still preposterous that a vigilante is hero student.

Kouda clasps his hands together in his lap, looking at them with mild interest. His mouth squirms, and he shrugs a shoulder.

“That tough, huh?” Fumikage says, receiving a sullen nod in return.

“And Kyushu?” Kouda asks in the same whispered voice.

“Nothing special.”

And he means that. Hawks, the Number Three Hero, chose *him*. It was an unexpected turn of events. But his reasons were… unorthodox. Could he really have chosen Fumikage because they are birds of a feather?

It turned out Hawks also wanted to learn more about the villains who attack their class. He chose him to relay information. So, Fumikage spent the internship filling his mentor in on the Villain Alliance instead of learning anything valuable.

“But if we’re talking about the ones who transformed the most,” Kaminari’s voice catches Fumikage’s attention, and he watches his classmate spin around in his chair. “Todoroki, dude! Your dad brought down the horde of villains! And Iida, you were in that area too, right?”

Iida and Midoriya huddle around Todoroki’s desk. The three of them were engaged in a conversation amongst themselves. Todoroki looks away, a small scowl on his face.

“Yeah! That must’ve been so intense. Happy you’re both okay,” Kirishima pipes up from his conversation with Sero.

Iida turns to face the class, his arms locking in position at his sides.

“I was not at the scene of the attack. Midoriya was visiting me, and we evacuated just in time,” he explains.

A sheepish smile tugs at Midoriya’s face.

“Sorry about that weird text you all got from me. My phone’s been on the fritz,” he apologizes.

“Oh! That’s what that was. I was worried when you suddenly shared your location, and it was in the same place as the attack,” Kirishima says.

“I watched the whole thing on TV. It was so intense,” Satou chimes in.

“The news has been obsessed with the Villain Alliance. Something about the hero killer and the Villain Alliance being connected?” Ojiro adds. “I can’t imagine how our rescue field training would’ve played out if the hero killer came along too.”

“Don’t say that! I still get shivers just thinking about those villains,” Mineta says, shuddering.

“And we wouldn’t have Miruko to save us either,” Ashido sighs. “You’re so lucky, Todoroki! You got to meet her, right?”

“You could say that,” Todoroki answers, and Ashido puffs her cheeks in jealousy.

“She’s so cool!” Hagakure exclaims. “I’m still amazed she stopped the hero killer the night before saving citizens in Hosu.”

Fumikage tilts his head to the side, his eyebrows furrowing together.

“Although she helped the police apprehend the hero killer, she didn’t stop him,” he says, drawing his classmates confusion.

“Did you guys miss the video?” Kaminari asks, incredulous.

“What video?” Uraraka asks.

“Oh my god. The Ground Zero one! The vigilante here went to Yokohama just to beat up Stain, and a resident of the neighboring apartment recorded some of the fight,” Kaminari explains, his hands waving around animatedly as he basks in the attention. “I guess he didn’t like people associating him with Stain. The video is gone now. Every time someone tries to reupload it, it’s pulled down within seconds.”

“Vigilante on vigilante crime is on the rise these days, I see,” Aoyama hums.

“Well, this is a good thing, right?” Jirou says, facing the class as she swerves in her chair. “I mean, thinking about what Mr. Aizawa said before. You know, about dealing with vigilantes and making our own judgements as heroes. The pros were having trouble catching Stain, and Ground Zero helped stop him. His actions prevented another hero from being attacked. So, if I were Miruko, I would think this was a good thing.”

“But Firecracker still got attacked. So, did he really prevent anything?” Ojiro points out.

“I meant heroes in the future now that he’s been arrested,” Jirou mumbles, looking away.

“He asked to not be called ‘Firecracker’ anymore,” Fumikage says. “Mr. Matsuda retired after the arrest. His interview was pretty vague, but he apologized for any lies he told the public regarding Stain. I don’t know what happened the first time Mr. Matsuda saw Ground Zero and Stain together, but it wasn’t the collusion he reported. I’m sure if Ground Zero didn’t confront Stain, probably in both incidences, Firecracker would be dead.”

“So, what? Are we supposed to respect him now?” Ojiro huffs.

“I don’t think this is about respect,” Yaoyorozu speaks up. She leans her chin onto her hand in thought. “No, that’s not entirely correct. It *is* about respect, but also about good judgement and field experience. Making connections and understanding the situation. If a vigilante has knowledge of the whereabouts of another vigilante, a *serial killer*, wouldn’t you, as the pro hero tasked with taking them down, want that information? I can’t help but think about how the events in Yokohama could’ve gone differently if there was a hero working *with* Ground Zero. Maybe Mr. Matsuda wouldn’t have been injured.”

“Mr. Aizawa expressed he has worked with vigilantes before. Clearly, those connections helped him close cases and be a better hero. Does that mean he deserves less respect because of it? Yes, there is the matter of just what a vigilante represents—a person who is breaking the hero and quirk restriction laws—but this issue is not as black and white as we may try to paint it…” Yaoyorozu trails off, her cheeks reddening suddenly. She hides her mouth and nose in her hands as she hunches at her desk. “I-I apologize for the long-winded ranting. I just didn’t want us to delve into nasty quips again. I think these topics are ones we should discuss at a higher level.”

“Don’t be sorry, Momo,” Jirou says, offering a smile. “I think you made some great points. You’ve obviously been thinking about this since the special lecture.”

The class quiets down, almost appeased by Yaoyorozu’s thoughtful inquiry. Or maybe they are deterred by her ability to turn conversations into teachable moments.

Fumikage glances around the room. Jirou quietly teases Yaoyorozu as she slides into the empty seat in front of her, poking a finger at the crease between the class vice president’s eyebrows. Ashido swings her legs from her seat on Uraraka’s desk while Tsuyu and Hagakure stand around them. Sero leans against Kaminari’s desk, showing Mineta and him something on his phone. Midoriya hides his bandaged fists in his pockets. Upon further inspection, Midoriya is quite tense. His shoulders are bunched, and his eyes trained on a spot on Todoroki’s desk. Fumikage’s heart quickens as his conspiracies churn in his head once more.

Midoriya may have a thought or two on his childhood friend masquerading as a vigilante of the night.

Fumikage shakes his head. He should *not* bother Midoriya with this. It is obvious how much of a hero fanatic the boy is, but that does not mean he also keeps up with the activities of vigilantes.

“It *is* kind of weird that Miruko was at the Yokohama battle and Hosu villain attack, right? Especially with the talk of Stain and the Villain Alliance working together,” Satou says, grabbing the attention of the scattered class.

“I guess? But would you rather she *not* show up in Hosu and destroy those villains?” Ashido asks.

“The videos of her taking down the Noumu-lookalikes are *crazy*,” Sero adds.

Satou shakes his head and opens his mouth to speak, but someone beats him to the punch.

“That’s not what—”

“It’s kind of funny how we were fighting over whether killing that Noumu guy is heroic or not before. And then the pros go and do it without a second thought,” Mineta says.

The class falls quiet.

“Will we have to do that too?” Hagakure asks in a small voice. Ojiro stands up from his chair.

“Absolutely not,” he declares. “I don’t care what the circumstances are.”

“I want to be a rescue hero like No. 13. Not fight to the death,” Uraraka says, slightly disturbed.

“But what happens if you’re put in a life or death situation?” Tsuyu asks.

“That’s…”

“I mean, at least you’ll be the hero,” Mineta points out.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ojiro asks, squinting his eyes at the boy.

“If you kill someone, people will probably side with you because you’re the hero, and you were right. So, at least there’s perks?” he says.

“That’s messed up, dude,” Sero chuckles nervously, shaking his head.

“But am I wrong? If you kill someone, and you’re labelled the villain? Say hello to Tartarus,” Mineta says louder, feeling a bit braver. “Honestly, Bakugou’s lucky he’s a hero student, or he’d be gone too.”

“Dude!” Kirshima exclaims.

Iida slams his hands on Todoroki’s desk.

“There are no *perks* to taking one’s life. As heroes, we *will do* the right thing. And as hero students, we will *learn how* to do the right thing,” Iida says in a stern voice, cutting his eye to Mineta. His stiff shoulders droop as he slides his hands off of the desk. “If Ms. Miruko and Mr. Endeavor thought their actions were the best ones to take during the Hosu villain attack… I can’t say I’m qualified enough to judge them.”

Iida opens his palms and stares at them.

“I’m sure, as we become heroes, we will be put in tough situations like theirs. We’ll be put to the highest tests a hero can face, but I trust our teachers to prepare us before those tests arrive,” he says.

The class falls quiet again.

Satou sighs, loud enough for Fumikage to notice, and sags in his seat.

“Satou?” Fumikage calls, and the boy snaps his head up. “What were you trying to say before?”

“Oh, it’s not that important.”

“Try me. I’m interested.”

“Well, I just thought of something before we went off topic… with the suspicions of Stain and the Villain Alliance working together, the article about Miruko possibly knowing about Hosu before it happened, and what Yaoyorozu was saying…” Satou starts to speculate. “What if Miruko *did* work with Ground Zero? Maybe not during the fight between the vigilantes, but afterwards. What if she learned about the attack on Hosu from him? And he learned of it from Stain?”

The feathers on the back of his neck stand up.

Fumikage shudders. Among the rising chatter, someone’s haunting stare hones on their hushed conversation. He wants to turn around, but he is afraid the identity of the eavesdropper will throw him further into his suspicions.

“That’s an interesting theory,” Fumikage says, humming a monotone note in thought. “But Ground Zero fled the scene before Miruko showed up. No one knows of his whereabouts. So, I don’t know how she would’ve been able to acquire that information. Also, I thought the news said the Hosu incident was a treacherous tribute to Stain. So, I don’t think Stain knew about it either.”

“I guess you’re right,” Satou relents, deflating from his moment of clarity.

A strangled noise escapes Kirishima. His eyes flick to Hagakure for a split second, and he tries not to laugh. Fumikage watches him tap away on his phone.

“Sorry, I,” he clears his throat. “Class is going to start, Bakugou’s not here yet. I was just messaging him.”

“What’d he say?” Kaminari asks.

“He said, and I quote, ‘The witch locked me in her castle. I’ll be there tomorrow.’ I think he’s talking about his mom,” Kirishima relays.

“What’d he say *before* that?” Sero asks with a knowing look.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kirishima answers with shifty eyes, his mouth pressed into a quivering line.

“If I called my mom a witch, she’d ground me,” Uraraka says.

“I know, right?” Ashido agrees.

“I asked him why, and he said that she’s just overreacting about something. You think something happened over the internship?” Kirishima questions.

“He was with Best Jeanist though. Nothing happened over there,” Sero says.

“Bakugou wasn’t with Best Jeanist?” Todoroki says, cocking his head to the side. “He was with Miruko.”

Fumikage watches Midoriya’s eyes silently scream.

“He got some sort of split internship deal worked out, so he was with Best Jeanist for a few days, and then Miruko,” Jirou explains, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, I still don’t understand how he got one nomination let alone two.”

“Guys,” Hakagure calls out, turning her phone for everyone to see. On it plays a fight between Bakugou and a hulking, gray villain rampaging down a street from Herogram. “I think he was pretty busy.”

“What!” Ashido snatches her phone. “He didn’t tell us about this!”

Sero grabs the phone from her.

“Oh, there’s Miruko! She’s shorter than I thought.”

“So, he attended the Hosu event too?” Aoyama asks.

“Wouldn’t that mean he was at the Ground Zero versus Stain throwdown?”

“Do you think he knows if Miruko met up with Ground Zero?” Satou whispers to Fumikage.

He might.

“Wow, and I thought we were friends. He’s been holding out on us,” Ashido complains. She stabs a finger in Kirishima’s direction. “Kiri! Tell Bakugou you’re coming over after school. He’ll agree if you ask enough times.”

“But I’m not visiting?” Kirishima says, cocking his head to the side.

“Yes, *we* are. It’s an ambush.”

“That’s not very heroic,” he starts to say, but the glint in her eyes speaks volumes. “On it.”

“I’m getting my Jeanist jeans—I mean, I’m getting answers from him if it’s the last thing I do.”

._._. **Rumi’s POV** ._._.

The Hero Public Safety Commission (Hero Commission) headquarters is an uptight and rigid building. A government prison built like a skyscraper. Rumi avoids it.

She does not need to visit the Hero Commission if she submits in her paperwork correctly through the hero portal. And that is how she likes it. Having to constantly drop by this lone building would put a dent in how she operates. The Hero Commission lets her do her job the way she wants, usually only contacting her if they know she is near a sudden villain attack and discharging her to the location. It is a nice set up with limited micromanaging on how she does her job.

However, there was no way to ditch this visit. Apparently, the topic of this meeting was too sensitive to discuss over the phone, or so they reasoned with her. She thinks they only said that because it is hard to catch her when she is always on the move. So, they forced her to come to them. Cunning little pencil pushers.

They are lucky she was able to wrap up her involvement in the Miyagi drug bust in time for this sudden summoning. Rumi sighs.

While teaching is not her strong suit, providing opportunities for exposure is not that hard. When the kid cornered her at her hotel to nominate him for Yuuei’s field internship program, they never discussed his skill sets. Honestly, she did not know what his quirk was until she saw the explosions shoot from his hands. His stubborn personality intrigued her enough that she had to say yes. So, she took him to Yokohama. She never has a peaceful patrol when in that city. It was the perfect place to see what he was boasting about! However, it was not the final destination.

Rumi wanted to take the kid along to get some experience in an undercover operation. She was not a part of the undercover team, but the pinch hitter instead. She would take down the villains as soon as the undercover team collected enough evidence to put them behind bars. With how much Bakugou enjoyed their patrols, the bust was going to be a surprise.

She did not expect the kid to surprise her back.

A receptionist leads her up ten floors to a conference room down a long hallway. There is a bit of coffee dribbled on his white button-down shirt, but he looks too tired to deal with it. Once they

reach conference room 10F, he gives her a curt bow and scurries back down the hallway.

Rumi snorts. She steps up the automatic doors, and a red light scans her body from head to toe.

“The more I’m in this building, the less lives I’m saving,” Rumi says, as soon as the doors slide open.

Two heads snap in her direction. A young woman who looks overdressed. Probably an intern. And Mr. Yokumiru Mera himself.

Mr. Mera’s stare is always off-putting. He looks even more exhausted than the last time Rumi was asked to come to headquarters months ago. Still wearing the same, ill-fitting suit that is too big for his lanky body. At least his beige hair does not signal he slept at his desk like the last time—where half of it was smushed to his head, and the other half was fluffed up.

“Miruko, I’m glad you could join us. We know you’re busy, especially with the media breathing down your neck after your efforts in Yokohama and Hosu,” Mr. Mera says in a disinterested tone.

She frowns.

Rumi hardly considers one article, maybe a television program too, questioning her knowledge of the Stain arrest and the Hosu villain attack as the media breathing down her neck. She was surprised to see it, but there is nothing she can do about it. If she speaks on their accusations, Bakugou could get caught in the crossfire.

She made it to Hosu in time to save the kid’s friends because he warned her of the attack in the first place. Because he suspected something was going to happen. Where else would he gain such suspicions if not from the hero killer himself?

She faces his comment head on, smiling and placing her hands on her hips.

“I can do my job perfectly fine. The news is allowed to speculate whatever they want,” she says before moving on to the matter at hand. “What is it this time? I sent in my hero incident reports you kept nagging me about. Don’t tell me it’s *another* internship program. Because I’m not taking on any more kids, especially if it’s not mandatory.”

Mr. Mera scoots his office chair closer to his desk and leans his elbows in. His folded hands obscure his mouth from her view.

“No, this won’t take more than a second of your time. We just need you to confirm something for us,” he assures her. Rumi raises an eyebrow.

“So much suspense!” she exclaims, a little peeved she was summoned for *a second of her time*. “What’s up?”

Mr. Mera nods his head towards the intern. She quickly turns off the conference room lights before clicking a remote towards the projector. The projector beeps as it turns on, pointing towards the large whiteboard. A slightly blurry picture appears. Rumi freezes.

It is her.

Her and the kid.

Rumi is carrying the kid, donned in his vigilante costume, towards the taxi Dr. Ota called. Right after he fainted from fighting hero killer Stain.

“A couple of months ago, we began holding meetings with different underground heroes on the statuses of vigilantes across Japan. Vigilante activity has been on the rise again, and it is the Hero Commission’s duty to quell it,” Mr. Mera explains, staring a hole into Rumi. “We have been collecting evidence on the vigilante of Musutafu, Ground Zero, since the close of the Night Stalker incidents. It’s been a while since a vigilante received so much favorable popularity, so he became a top priority to uncover.”

Rumi swallows the lump in her throat.

“Is first-year Yuuei student, Katsuki Bakugou, the identity of Ground Zero?”

She cannot find her voice. As the seconds tick past, her silence speaks for her. The intern clicks off the projector, and the picture disappears. The lights turn back on. Mr. Mera types on his laptop, the taps of his keyboard filling the air.

“Thank you, Ms. Usagiyama. That will be all.”

Chapter End Notes

I picked on sweet Ojiro again.

Are you still mad at me? I'm hoping not (pt. 1)

Chapter Notes

Last time, Mitsuki forces Katsuki to take a day off from school. Class 1-A discusses the two big events that occurred during their field internships: the Hosu villain attack and the Yokohama battle. Tokoyami considers the identity of Ground Zero may be closer than they think. The Hero Commission confirms it.

Song title is from “Like to Be You" by Shawn Mendes and Julia Michaels (yes I changed it). These five chapters (17-21) are the end-of-term exam arc, so the chapter titles are from the same song. Chapters 17 and 18 will be in the same day.

[Updated] Tentative Chapter 18 Post Date: March 21, 2022 (this chapter is unfortunately really long...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** – Tuesday._._.

(Flashback: Year 2029)

Katsuki’s phone vibrates again.

Izu: I have a spaghetti squash I want to eat for dinner, but I have no knives to cut this thing open

Izu: I don’t know how I lived here for six months with no knives.

Izu: What if someone broke in? I’d have to pull out a fork.

Kats: Pry it open with your hands. And hit them with the squash. Not essentially in that order.

Izu: More likely to injure someone with the squash than pry it open with my hands.

Kats: You have super fucking strength. And you shouldn’t need it.

Izu: It’s the principle of it, Kacchan. I don’t want to do that.

Izu: Anyways, a stair fell from the sky the other day. I should just drop the squash from three stories up.

Kats: What?

Izu: I’m trying to get out of my lease.

Kats: You’re just throwing chairs for shits and giggles?

Izu: Not chairs, stairs.

Kats: What kind of ratty, old structure do you live in?

Izu: It's cement, and it fell from the floor above me. Literally would've killed me. I walk under these stairs every day. The horrid noise it made was probably a warning from the devil himself.

Katsuki's shoulders shake, and he struggles to keep his composure.

Izu: The sound of the stairs crashing mixed in with my crazy elderly neighbors who screamed, 'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' during my phone call with my mom. My life is a bad movie.

Kats: Stop. I can't breathe.

Izu: And then, the old man banged on my door and said, "I don't have any hot cocoa. Could you get me some?"

Izu: If they were a nice, elderly couple, I'd be more inclined to help, but no. They're not nice, and they're not cute. They're loud and mean.

Izu: I caved and gave him his cocoa.

Kats: Izuku.

Izu: Did you know people have called the cops on them twice in the past three weeks? Except, I think the old woman hits the old man, and I think he called the cops once. It's terrible. I wouldn't be surprised if she was a retired villain.

Kats: What the fuck, Izuku

Izu: I need a lawyer to get out this lease. I am the #6 hero, and my property manager won't let me out of my lease.

Kats: Your life really is a bad movie.

Izu: I'm laughing, but I'm crying. So, things are great. On the bright side, it's never dull.

Kats: I bet

Izu: I toured other apartments last weekend just to help lift my spirits.

Kats: You're welcome to come to my building where you can have missing electrical circuits for over two months because maintenance keeps dodging you.

Kats: You make my situation sound fucking amazing. I just deal with my neighbors' sex lives. I thought someone was dying at first.

Izu: That's still bad.

Kats: But better than you.

Izu: Of course, the #7 hero would turn this into a competition.

Kats: you beat me on a technicality

Izu: we both know that's not true

Kats: Bitch

Izu: I miss your colorful insults

Kats: Connect-the-dot faced broccoli bitch with ass dandruff

Izu: Thanks

"Ahem."

Best Jeanist's voice silences the voice of whichever intern was forced to present the information for their next inter-agency mission. He always lets the quiet crawl for a moment—a common tactic he uses to make Katsuki sweat. Unfortunately, it does not work anymore.

"Is this critical mission briefing boring you?" Best Jeanist asks in a pointed tone.

Katsuki slowly drags his eyes from his phone. This is the first of many predetermined meetings for a potential villain group that Izuku and Shouto discovered during their first reconnaissance tour with the Neo Hero Commission. The icy-hot asshole went on personal leave right after he returned, so they will still need to fill him in when he returns.

Katsuki will never understand how these two idiots started an agency together. Izuku still cannot tie a tie, and Shouto is as dense as ever. A recipe for disaster. Though he digresses.

Everyone in this room received a summary packet of known information on the villain group before the meeting began. They are still gauging how destructive this unnamed group may become, let alone decide how to stop them. They need more data.

But this meeting is a regurgitation of the packet. If the other extras in this room are not smart enough to read, why must Katsuki suffer through a boring recap of something he already knows?

"You see," he says and waves his phone in the air for the room to see, "If this is out, then this meeting should've been an email."

"Ha!" Izuku covers his unexpected outburst with a cough. "That's terrible, Kacchan. You should be listening."

"Just because you text underneath the table doesn't mean I didn't catch you too, Mr. Deku," Best Jeanist says, cutting his eye to the other rude hero.

Katsuki does not hide his laugh.

·_·_·

"Good Morning, Bakugou—"

Katsuki taps the screen of his phone, pausing the voicemail message to scrub the sleep from his eyes. He planned on restarting his six-mile run and stretching routine early this morning, but the voicemails in his notification reel gave him pause.

Why did Best Jeanist call him at five in the morning? He restarts the message when his eyes feel less dry.

"Since you sat in on a meeting with my investigation team, I believe you deserve a heads up. We finished our investigation on and subsequent takedown of Build-A-Beaver Workshop. The details of our efforts have made their way to the press, and I'm sure there will be buzz by the time you wake. Regardless of how the news spreads, I want you to know we uncovered and shut down a trafficking operation dealing in people with physically-presenting quirks. We managed to reunite many abductees with their families. However, there are several deceased victims we did not save in time and an unknown number of victims we may never find. The second reason I wanted to relay this information to you is because I don't recall my schooling explicitly discussing how a hero handles death in the field, especially when it comes to civilians…"

The message ends abruptly by an automated voice taking over. Katsuki taps the second voicemail left on his phone.

"…I recall being thrust into the subject of death through experience. As heroes, it is only proper to accompany the local law enforcement and personally convey the news to the deceased's family members. There is no way to anticipate the reactions of grieving civilians. You can receive sadness, anger, or a void of emotions. I need you to understand that you cannot save a civilian from their grief. But you can listen attentively and allow them space to express their grief. Let them know you are there for them, regardless of how many civilians you must visit. Remember to also allow yourself proper time to process the event. Being on the receiving end of endless grief can take a toll on a hero too. Many pros forget this last part. It is hard to stop yourself from taking a civilian's feelings personally."

Best Jeanist pauses for a second before his voice comes out a bit rushed. The allowable voicemail length must be reaching its end.

"Don't hesitate to reach out. Goodbye."

Immediately, Katsuki checks the well-known Musutafu news websites. Best Jeanist is right. Several headlines have switched from covering the Hosu villain attack to the Build-A-Beaver Workshop scandal. As Katsuki reads the articles detailing the gruesome truth behind the company, he cannot help but think of Daisuke. Have the Koryo's gotten up for the day? How will they see this news? Have they seen the news already? Daisuke kept everything he witnessed during his capture close to his heart, only letting Katsuki in on a single party jingle. Just how much horror did he witness? And how much of a burden does this exposed knowledge put on his parents?

Katsuki wants to visit them.

He clicks his teeth.

He cannot.

The day Katsuki woke up in Yokohama General, he decided to stop the vigilantism. The fight with Stain and his subsequent disappearance from the scene gives him one last chance to put the past year and a couple of months behind him. He means to do just that.

It took his father's worrying plea, Aizawa's suspicious reprimand, Miruko's second chance, and his mother's breakdown to get through to his stubborn skull.

Katsuki breathes deeply.

He knows why he is hesitant to stop—why he has been hesitant to stop. He just has to suck it the fuck up and take it like a man. Maybe if he focuses on something else, he can prevent it. Regardless, if he goes back out at night, he cannot guarantee his safety. And he has one strike left before his mother pulls him out of Yuuei all together or does something equally extreme.

So, no, he cannot visit Daisuke. The world can assume the vigilante of that night died from the multiple stabbings he sustained.

He needs to burn the costume hanging in the back of his closet.

Katsuki chews his bottom lip as he swings his legs around the side of his bed. His flexes and curls his right hand, letting the stabbing pain remind him his choice is right.

However.

What kind of fucked-up person breaks a promise with a traumatized child? He regained threads of trust with Daisuke when he made that promise. The trust he broke when he left a crying child in the middle of a street to protect his identity and avoid capture. Whether he wants to admit it or not, this child looks up to him as a vigilante.

Katsuki shakes the thoughts from his head.

He needs to start his day.

·_·_·

His mother tilts his head backwards to kiss his forehead, pulling a disgruntled noise from him. Her fingers are warm from washing dishes and tidying the kitchen.

“Can’t you see I’m eating?” he grumbles. He rips off a large bite of toast in the awkward position for added effect. Her eyebrow twitches, and she flicks his forehead in retaliation.

“Such a brat,” she says, taking her seat across the dining table. Katsuki glances towards the staircase. This will be the second breakfast in a row between him and his mother.

“Where’s the old man?” he asks.

“He went into work early to speed up fabric selection for the new line,” Mitsuki explains. “I’ll join the team after you leave for school.”

“Are you slacking off?” Katsuki teases with a slow shake of his head.

His mother snorts.

“Not in a million years,” she says, but her face tightens a bit. “Your father and I decided I will be more present at home, especially when work gets busy.”

Katsuki frowns. He is a grown man. He does not need to be watched.

“I’m following your damn rules, aren’t I?” he snaps.

“*Katsuki*.”

Her voice weaves exhaustion into his name. Makes his name sound beaten and battered and too tired to fight. He wonders just how far he pushed his mother. No, he knows how far he pushed his mother since the moment she slid open his hospital room door. He does not push the issue further.

Mitsuki regards him for a moment. She hides her mouth behind a light blue teacup, her eyes trained on a destination far away. When she pulls the cup away from her face, a small, amused smile reveals itself.

“Do you remember the last time we played your little ‘Heroes versus Villains’ game, and you tried to murder me with your All Might doll?” she asks innocently.

Katsuki’s entire body jerks violently as bread lodges itself into his throat. He beats a fist into his constricting chest as his eyes prickle with tears. A laugh tries to crawl through the burning in his throat.

His mother does not hide her laugh.

“I didn’t speak to you for the rest of the day, and you put on that god-awful concert as an apology,” she reminisces, shaking her head before dabbing her mouth with a napkin. “I still don’t know what was worse: being jabbed in the stomach with hard plastic or having my ears assaulted by banging pots and pans.”

“Hag,” Katsuki wheezes, sniffing harshly. “How dare you make fun of my once-in-a-lifetime concert?”

“Brat, you tried to kill me.”

“Not intentionally.”

“I’m not too sure about that.”

Katsuki presses his lips together, trying to cull his laughter and act serious against these false accusations on his character. However, one shared look has them both dying all over again.

All right, he might remember this game. He might remember spotting his mother crawl behind the couch as quietly as possible. He might remember screaming, “I am here, you fiend!” as he jumps off the back of the couch like a pro wrestler, his Silver Age All Might figure positioned in his hand like a dagger.

He definitely remembers his mother grinding her knuckles into his skull and screaming bloody murder in his ear directly after the attempted homicide.

“Why’re you bringing this up?” Katsuki manages to ask.

After gathering herself, Mitsuki crosses her arms, almost hugging herself. She sighs slowly.

“I don’t know. I’m feeling nostalgic.”

The clanking of utensils and dishes bounces between them. His mother sets her tea down once more.

“So,” she starts, dragging out the word in a teasing manner. “It was a surprise to see you made new friends. Mina was such a lovely girl, wasn’t she? Very pretty—”

“What’re you doing? Where’re you going with this?” Katsuki cuts her off as horror scrunches his face.

Mitsuki stares at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Then, the red one? What was his name? He was cute too—”

Katsuki points his chopsticks at his mother accusingly.

“This is why we don’t talk.”

·_·_·

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/groundzerosnumberonefan · 3h

[**GZ**] ***“Build-A-Beaver Workshop Revealed: The truth will have you stuffed with horror”***

—by Rei Nakamura

[URL LINK]

...I know Ground Zero was only a part of the discovery, but I thought everyone would appreciate the closing of this case. I’m at a loss for words.

“The investigation team lead by #4 Hero, Best Jeanist, revealed Build-A-Beaver Workshop as a front for an underground taxidermy operation. People with animalistic appearances were hypnotically led to the store’s location, carefully preserved, and sold to rich buyers across Japan and internationally as works of art.”

Wherever he may be… can we just talk about how none of this would be known if it wasn’t for our vigilante?

451k upvotes · 296 comments

…

[Best Comments]

gloobbabs · 3h

“Eighty-six captives were found and released from eight storefronts and two larger facilities. The facilities were used to preserve, advertise, and ship people to their respective buyers. One survivor noted, ‘I watched my friend [complete the taxidermy process] and pose for photoshoots. They had some hidden website humiliatingly similar to the Build-A-Beaver Workshop website where they advertised us like toys. One of the facility overseers was chatty and bored. He showed me it. He liked me I guess. And then my friend was packed up and wheeled out like a new present for Christmas. I was next.’ The Tokyo Police Department and additional members of the core investigation team continue to work with police departments in other cities to reunite rescued civilians with their families.”

I know we can all read, but this passage hurt me. A website? Like "Hi, B.A.B.W. Member! Did you see we added a new friend to our store? It's Jay the Sting Ray!" I think I'm going to be sick.

215k upvotes · 104 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| hellavatime · 18h

|| *There're a lot of holes in this and other articles. They mention the imprisonment of the CEO and other company executives, but it doesn't mention if everyone involved was arrested—only the ones who were too confident in their contingency plans and poor police work to flee. Also, there's no mention of bringing the "rich buyers" to justice. It makes me think they don't have a way to track them down.*

If I had to guess, they covered their tracks before the police could get their hands on their data. Either way, the disgusting assholes are still free. The interviewed survivor could've been the last person to see the website.

|| 71k upvotes · 35 replies

.

starryeyesinthenight · 3h

Who decided that was an appropriate headline? I'm disappointed in Nakamura.

107k upvotes · 84 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| takoyakibaby32 · 21h

|| *It's click bait. Nakamura's writing is usually serious. I doubt she had the final say on the headline, so maybe the editor or someone.*

|| 68k upvotes · 23 replies

.

itwasmeallalong · 3h

Since no one's asking it, I will. Is Ground Zero dead?

99k upvotes · 201 replies

|| [Recent Replies]

|| groundzerosfacemask · 21m

|| *Stop. I'm so fucking scared right now it might be true.*

|| 501 upvotes · 2 replies

|| dorem1 · 20m

|| *Didn't someone say they saw Miruko carry his lifeless body through the streets of Yokohama?*

|| 701 upvotes · 18 replies

|||| foreverryourz · 19m

|||| *STOPPPPP PLS BE JOKING*

|||| 100 upvotes

|||| pothosqueen · 19m

|||| *i wish miruko would speak on the rumors already*

|||| 83 upvotes · 1 reply

|||||| brokeho37 · 10m

|||||| *Isn't she on vacation or smth? Her profile on the Hero Commission site is inactive*

|| bombsquad555 · 21m

|| *he was some quirkless bitch. of course he finally died.*

|| 50 upvotes · 42 replies

|||| noragrets · 15m

|||| *I will dox you if I see you in GZ convos again*

.

drowninginmargs · 2h

this is gonna fuel the GZ impersonators

202k upvotes · 91 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| rokutheloofa · 15m

|| *I SAW ONE!! PEOPLE R REALLY OUT HERE PRETENDING! DUDE WAS ALL STIFF! I'M STUNNED. APPALLED. OUTRAGED. MUSUTAFU HAS NO SHAME*

|| 95k upvotes · 43 replies

|||| riptide410 · 15m

|||| *okay but at least this one could fight. i think i saw the same guy. others are out here thinking GZ's name is armor. it's dangerous on these streets*

|| akascuseme · 15m

|| *I hate to be that person, but Ground Zero has spiky, blonde hair and red eyes. Someone mentioned him being around their height (5'8"), and another person said his voice is kind of deep. Everyone better know this. We. Do. Not. Accept. Fakes.*

|| 107k upvotes · 39 replies

…

[Newest Comments]

dbsdbs · 2m

If no one sees him in a week, I will.

3k upvotes · 3 replies

|| [All Replies]

|| ginbiscuit · 2m

|| *well that was ominous as fuck*

|| 156 upvotes

|||| sososocial · 1m

|||| *Just look the other way and wait.*

|| pandamanda · 1m

|| *Tag me when you get answers.*

|| 19 upvotes

Chapter End Notes

If this chapter seems short, it's because the next one is going to be annoying.
Note A: Koryo is an evil/haunting kitsune.

Every time we argue and get caught up in the moment (pt. 2)

Chapter Notes

> Last time, news rush to report the Build-a-Beaver Workshop scandal. Katsuki hangs up his hoodie for good and spends breakfast with his mother. Heroddit reacts to the scandal and the disappearance of their beloved vigilante.
>
> Song title is from “Like to Be You” by Shawn Mendes and Julia Michaels (changed this arc’s song). This chapter is a continuation of the Tuesday after the field internships.
> The future this Katsuki comes from is different from what will unfold canonically.
>
> *[Updated] Chapter 19 Post Date: June 20th, 2022* finally have time off work next week, so I'll have it done by this date

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** ._._.

“Lock the door,” All Might says, leaning forward on the lone three-legged stool.

Katsuki raises an eyebrow. He bets his left toenail All Might does not realize how overbearing his words sound.

When inflated, the hero’s voice booms when he speaks. It spreads his confidence and reassures the public that they are safe. But in his deflated form, there is an underlying uneasiness to his words. His actions are timider, quieter. He becomes easily overlooked, unless you are one of the two fanboys in the room or his closest friends and colleagues. Yet in this period of deflation, he overwhelms the space. An outlier to his usual actions. His shoulders are too stiff. His fingers are icicles intertwined atop his legs.

Midoriya swallows audibly, the silencing weight of the room amplifying the action. Katsuki can almost hear the cogs in his head churning over why All Might is acting so serious. Midoriya’s eyes dart from All Might’s hunched position across the coffee table to the couch on their side.

“What,” Katsuki says curtly, battling the silence with unbothered strength. He drops onto one side of the couch, propping his feet on the coffee table and crossing his arms. Midoriya follows in suit, sitting properly.

What is so important that Midoriya had to whisk him from the nurse’s office before homeroom?

Katsuki’s residual nerve damage was too much of a hindrance to write off. The pain was not bad. If he moved wrong, sharp aches raced up his arm and leg, and the staticky tingling of numbness quickly followed in suit. However, the real problems were a delayed reaction to his movements and a weakness in his right arm. His leg buckled one too many times during his day of rest, his arm moving out of sync with his intentions. So, he left early enough this morning to catch Recovery Girl as she was unlocking her office door.

The withering look she gave him told him they will talk about this set of injuries during their lunchtime session.

Regardless of her nagging, Recovery Girl is one of a kind. She did what a renowned specialist could not. She instructed him to take it easy on his arm and leg for about a week and come back in for a follow-up appointment (since the healing needs to be broken up into two sessions), but she lessened the residual nerve damage enough to stop being an impediment.

All Might sighs deeply.

“You both encountered some atrocities during your internships. Young Midoriya filled me in over the weekend about the noumu invasion in Hosu, but I have yet to speak to you, Young Bakugou, as you were absent yesterday… You and your mentor encountered the hero killer.”

Katsuki blows a puff of hot air, masking how his arms tighten across his chest. The latest sources say the hero killer finished recovering and has been transferred to Tartarus. This chapter of his life is closed. He does not know why All Might is keeping tabs on the details of *his* internship, but if Miruko and Dr. Ota kept their promise, not a damn soul knows what really happened. And he will keep it that way.

“We arrived after the fact. Don’t fuss over a routine arrest,” he relays, and All Might’s shoulders relax a bit.

“That’s good to hear. I tried to get ahold of Ms. Usagiyama, but I couldn’t reach her. I should’ve expected such from the hero always on the move,” All Might says, clearing his throat. “I didn’t know how bad it was in Yokohama until Young Midoriya told me about a video. And your mentor was the hero discharged to the scene! The horrible luck of you two, and after the villains attacked your class—”

“Hold up.” Katsuki raises his hand as he interrupts All Might’s ramble. His heart stutters off beat with a heavy thud. “What video?”

“Oh, I never saw it,” All Might starts to answer, but Katsuki turns his attention to Midoriya instead, unintentionally cutting the man off.

“What video,” he asks. A thinly veiled demand as he tries to keep his voice level.

Midoriya refuses to look at him, staring at the way his scarred fingers grip his knees. It aggravates him.

“A nearby resident took a video of the fight between Ground Zero and Stain, that’s all,” Midoriya says, his words come rushed and defensive as he risks a quick glance. “It cuts off when Ground Zero walks towards the edge of the roof, and the police start showing up… so you and Miruko aren’t in it… and it’s basically been banned from the internet anyways.”

Katsuki’s head nods in a jerky motion as he faces forward again, eyes glued to the coffee table.

Someone took a video of him.

A resident watched the whole thing and decided everyone else in Japan should too. His eyes dash through an invisible novel as his mind combs through that fateful night and his every move.

How the hell did he miss the circulation of a whole video on him? Admittedly, he was not searching for any articles or scrolling through any social media posts on Yokohama during his stint in the hospital. He did watch a news special on the Hosu attack though. He was more focused on the fact that Iida, Midoriya, and Todoroki were practically summoned to the scene like a damn prophecy.

Is his voice in the video? Stain had him monologuing like some two-bit hero, and he does not know if that resident was within hearing range. They could have picked up their argument.

Did they see his face? It was dark, but Katsuki ripped off his face mask halfway through the night. His hood was pulled over his head, but one wrong angle, and his life is over. But the chloroform drenching the fabric threatened to grant Stain his wish of one unconscious meat bag and one dead pro hero. Katsuki had no choice. He was lucky to get away from the scene in the state the drug left him.

Did they see his quirk go off? He exploded in a moment of weakness and resentment, the result of a lack of control, but Stain made him so mad. He can still remember stinging pressure threatening the palms of his hands has he tried to restrain his quirk, and how it fell victim to the swelling anger that suffocated his lungs. How his hands sparked against his control. How hot the glove felt as it melted between the heat of his quirk and the skin of Stain's throat. If he detonated even one percent hotter, the hero killer would not be breathing. An irrecoverable consequence of his anger.

Katsuki's heart thuds offbeat once more.

He should be ashamed, focusing on the repercussions of his actions rather than the actions themselves. The memories of his internship and a promise to be better should not be his only consequences. He lost control—of his emotions, of his body—something he has been doing too much of since he returned to the past. And a hero cannot lose control.

"That's what I want to discuss: the hero killer. More importantly, his quirk. Young Midoriya was going on about the fight so much when we talked, I figured the quirk and others like it worried you," All Might says, ripping Katsuki's focus from the light reflecting off of the coffee table.

Midoriya snaps his head forward, confusion contorting his expression.

"Why would they worry me?" he asks, his eyebrows furrowing in thought. He touches a knuckle to his chin.

"Well, a paralysis quirk such as the hero killer's *is* worrisome. Ms. Zo Sato actually wrote about it on her hero blog a night ago. This post made me think she has some secret connections to the Yokohama police department because she gave her readers new information on the hero killer's quirk. Apparently—and I was able to gather some of it from the video too—the hero killer can paralyze his target upon tasting a sample of their blood. But what is really interesting is that the duration of the paralysis depends on the target's blood type. There wasn't much information on which blood type lasts which length, but Ms. Sato interviewed several of the hero killer's previous targets and posted a table of blood type and time paralyzed. She thinks people with O blood have the shortest paralysis times—A and AB being somewhere in the middle—and those with B have the longest paralysis, up to eight or nine minutes based on the interviews."

Midoriya sucks in a quick breath, but before the boy can say another word, Katsuki snaps his fingers, a string of tiny explosions popping off his fingertips for emphasis. Midoriya jolts from the sound, the upcoming verbal essay slipping from his tongue.

“We get it. All Might, what’re you trying to say?” Katsuki says.

The man blinks in surprise, his eyes darting between the pair before he clears his throat.

“…I guess I was wrong,” All Might finally admits. “It’s not too important then.”

“No, I’m sorry, All Might! I got a bit carried away. Please tell me,” Midoriya presses.

The man rubs the back of his neck.

“Do you remember what I told you when I granted you this power?” he asks, chuckling awkwardly at Midoriya’s painstakingly accurate acting of the words, ‘Now eat this.’

“I said that it doesn’t matter how as long as you take in my DNA.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that,” Midoriya says, nodding his head attentively. Belatedly, the boy’s eyes widen, and he shoots up from his seat. “Wait, are you saying if someone takes in *my* DNA, I’ll lose One-For-All? Oh no, *oh no*, All Might. Yesterday, Uraraka really wanted to try one of my mom’s tamagoyaki, and the one she picked definitely had a piece of my hair on it, but I was too embarrassed to say anything, and she snatched and ate it so *fast*—please tell me I didn’t just give One-For-All to Uraraka—what if she spontaneously explodes!”

“*Ha!*” Katsuki exclaims in a sudden outburst, biting down onto his knuckle to contain it.

All Might looks at him for a split second, but tries to calm his protégé instead, waving his hands reassuringly.

“No, Young Midoriya, calm down. One-For-All won’t transfer to a new recipient unless its user wishes it. So, it can’t be forcibly stolen, like through a vampiric quirk, but it can be forcibly passed on. I just wanted you to know that, so you wouldn’t worry, but I seem to have caused you unnecessary panic instead,” All Might explains. After a thoughtful pause, he adds, “She would’ve exploded upon ingestion if you truly gave her One-For-All.”

“O-oh,” Midoriya sighs, sinking back into to the couch. “I promise I don’t normally give my friends food with hair on it.”

“Okay, Young Midoriya,” All Might laughs uncomfortably. “Ahem, I also wanted to discuss your progress.”

“I guess I never got the chance to tell you about my progress before I visited Iida,” Midoriya confesses. “Well, since Kacchan and I figured out how to safely activate One-For-All before the internship, Gran Torino and I focused on sparring while under Full Cowling. I got thrown around a lot in the beginning… but I think I’m getting the hang of it. Gran Torino even took me on patrols to get the hang out it in a real situation.”

Midoriya explains the robbery he helped stop, excitement slowly filling his words. In the animated waving of his arms, the sleeves of his blazer slip, and white bandages peek out from under the material. Katsuki narrows his eyes. Did Gran Torino smack him around so badly he still needs first aid?

“I noticed!” All Might exclaims. “You missed yesterday’s exercise, Young Bakugou. I devised a speedy rescue race! I barely recognized Young Midoriya. He surprised me so much. He was

jumping and flying and flipping all over the place. I was wondering when you developed such style."

"It was… something I sort of developed as I trained… and I also took inspiration from my surroundings," Midoriya drags out a half-assed explanation, his face rivaling the red in his signature sneakers.

Katsuki snorts.

"'Took inspiration' my ass. Who'd you stalk this time? Sero? Ojiro? Their fighting patterns make the most sense. Iida? Ashido's got good reflexes, but you're too awkward to move like her," he surmises. Izuku in any timeline is a fucking copycat, and his classmates offer the best material every single school day.

Midoriya stares at him for a brief moment.

"You caught me, Kacchan," he says in a half-hearted chuckle, pressing his thumbnails into the pads of his index fingers. Katsuki raises an eyebrow.

"Astute observation, Young Bakugou! Your classmates are very skilled at crossing tough terrain quickly. I'm glad you learned a lot, Young Midoriya. I know I can be a little hopeless as you develop your quirk," All Might says sheepishly. "But let's circle back later and discuss the details of your training with Gran Torino. I want to start you on a more personalized and rigorous regime next week."

"I've got some ideas on what he could do too," Katsuki adds. "Based on what I've seen so far."

All Might may try to focus on weight training and strength building. Working Midoriya's muscles to bear the weight of One-For-All is important, but his quirk also manifests differently than his predecessor. He is not, nor does he become, a complete powerhouse like Satou. Or All Might. Izuku defeats his foes with critical thinking and the combined effort of his quirks. Strongarming foes with 100% One-For-All-infused punches is unnecessary and detrimental to his body. So, Midoriya will need a well-rounded training regime to accommodate for his incoming quirks and their inevitable mutation and growth.

Katsuki also needs to figure out how to work with the boy to draw out the other quirks. Inconspicuously. And hopefully, as he grows into his power, Midoriya will have half a brain to upgrade that horrible hero costume to support his needs. He does not remember the furry spandex suit lasting this damn long before.

The morning bells ring through the halls.

"Will do, All Might," Midoriya says, standing up and grabbing his schoolbag. "Sorry, we have homeroom now. Kacchan, let's go."

As soon as the meeting door clicks shut behind him, he rounds on the boy.

"Why are you all banged up?" Katsuki asks, looking pointedly at Midoriya's arm. "I thought you weren't anywhere near the noumu attacks. Unless that's due to Gran Torino's training."

"Why were you in the nurse's office earlier?" Midoriya shoots back, the defensiveness in his voice returns at full force. "I thought the hero killer was a routine arrest. Unless that was related to

Miruko's training."

Katsuki nearly trips over his feet.

"What the hell?" he says, incredulous. "That's none of your business."

"Then, neither is this," Midoriya says firmly, tightly gripping the straps of his yellow backpack and speed walking ahead to their class.

It takes Katsuki longer than he is willing to admit to recover. He blinks back the shock, wondering where this little shit found the audacity to take that tone with him.

When was the last time Midoriya lashed out like that? Oh, right, when he questioned Katsuki's knowledge of One-For-All and the differences in personality between him and his younger self near the beginning of the school year.

He does not know what bullshit Midoriya concocted in his head this time, but the secretiveness is frustrating. What happened to the eager hero-in-training who hastily called to tell him about thwarting a robbery?

"What crawled up your ass?" he snaps, jogging to catch up to Midoriya. He grabs the boy's shoulder from behind, stopping him from entering their classroom. Unfortunately, the gathered class makes him forget what he is going to say.

"Picture this," Ashido starts, clapping and folding her hands together in front of her mouth. She stands in front of the class, walking in dramatic, slow strides along the smartboard and dragging out the anticipation.

"Kirishima and I go over Bakugou's house yesterday after school. His mom answers the door. Such a sweet lady. They look so much alike, it's crazy," she says, clearing her throat to get back on track.

"Anyways, the lights are off, and it's super dark. Some god-awful sound is playing in the background. No, *two* god-awful sounds. One of the 'The Summoning' movies is playing on the TV —which is *huge* by the way—and Bakugou's dad is half hiding his face in the couch. Bakugou, the boy, the legend himself, is standing on the couch, pointing these crazy sparking claws at the ceiling and shouting like the possessed lady on screen is going to eat his soul. And then it's like something possesses his sweet mom, and she starts screaming at them to shut up."

Ashido scans every one of their classmates before locking eyes with Kirishima. Her eyes shine. He cracks a grin. And they both burst out laughing.

"I was speechless," Ashido says, barely containing her giggles. She flicks a lone tear from the corner of her eye. "Honestly, since I got my designer jeans—and I look *stunning* in them—I don't care we visited hell."

"I think we learned a lot," Kirishima says with a quivering smile. "Not about his internship. We forgot about that as soon as his mom answered the door. But, man, I understand where he gets his personality from."

"Neither of you thought to record this masterpiece?" Sero comments, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Stop because I’m sad too! I didn’t think Bakugou’s voice could go that high,” Ashido says.

“How fucking hilarious,” Katsuki interrupts the conversation, directing the class’s attention to the entrance. “I think I’ll take those jeans back, Ashido.”

Ashido sucks in a breath so sharp, Katsuki is surprised she does not choke. She slowly faces the classroom entrance. And when he releases Midoriya’s shoulder to hold out his hand, Ashido jumps back as if she was burned.

“Pry them from my cold, dead hands,” she shouts. She sprints to hide behind Uraraka, clutching the girl’s shoulders for dear life. “Ochako, save me!”

“What? Why me?”

“Use your Gunhead training on him.”

“Oh!”

Uraraka regards her for a second before she purses her lips and raises her arms, flexing her biceps in a show of newly acquired strength.

“That’s right! Not so tough now, huh, Sparky?” Ashido calls out from behind Uraraka.

Katsuki runs a hand down his face.

“You’re ridiculous,” he grumbles, walking to his seat.

“That’s rich coming from the guy who challenged a movie ghost,” Jirou points out innocently.

He snaps his head in her direction, stabbing his finger at her accusingly.

“That’s not what happened!”

He is not *scared* of horror movies. He only gets *a little* worked up when watching them, which is how it should be. What is the point of watching a movie that does not invoke any emotion? The suspense, the reveal of each night creature—it is all a part of the fun. His father gets it, which is why they watch horror movies in the dark for added effect. The rush of emotion is *fun*, and directing it at the screen is therapeutic.

More importantly, no one else is supposed to be there besides his mother.

“Why didn’t you pause the movie?” Asui adds. “If you make too much noise, you’ll bother your neighbors.”

“It’s okay, Kacchan. A lot of children are afraid of supernatural beings,” Midoriya offers as he passes him to get to his seat. That comment irks him the most. Katsuki cannot tell if it is the calm reassurance of his words, the patronizing undertone, the fact that this is the most Izuku-like insult Midoriya has ever said to him, or a combination of all three. Because the best insult is one that appears kind.

Katsuki snatches the front of Midoriya’s shirt with a fist, startling the boy. The insult is on the tip of his tongue, and he has just about had it.

He catches himself.

The frustration bubbling under his skin. The irritated twitch of his eye. The snarl curling his lip. Why is he getting so worked up over taunts from these brats? Katsuki lets go of Midoriya's shirt, lightly shoving him back and turning to the rest of the class.

"Stop fucking with me," he threatens, a growl rumbling in his throat.

"No way. You should see your face," Jirou snickers, standing up from her seat to poke the scrunched skin between Katsuki's eyebrows. "Priceless."

"Quiet down and find your seats," Aizawa drawls as he walks through the door. He sets his binder down on the podium at the front of the class, flipping through it to find the correct page.

"You're still making that face," Jirou whispers, a litheness in her voice.

"What face?" he bites back in a hushed voice.

"It's like a," she pauses to jut out her lip, furrow her brow, widen her eyes, and crinkle her nose until her shoulders begin to quiver, "I can't do it. It's too Bakugou for me to copy."

"I don't do that."

"Yes, you *do*. The pupils of your eyes disappear when they get all scrunchy. How is that physically possible?" she questions under her breath. "I can't believe I used to think it was scary."

He gives her a wilting look. She smiles in return.

"Let's see here," Aizawa starts to say, grabbing the attention of the class. "Summer break is approaching fast, and as heroes-in-training, you don't have the flexibility to relax for thirty days. Instead, you'll be going to a forest lodge."

The class erupts in cheers.

"I knew it!" Kaminari says excitedly.

"Let's give each other dares!" Ashido suggests.

"And fireworks. Let's set some off," Asui adds.

"Summer break means delicious curry dishes," Satou points out.

"But if any of you fail the end-of-term exam, then you'll be stuck in school in remedial hell," Aizawa states, and the weight of his words quiets the class.

Katsuki blanches, a hand reflexively covers his stomach. If there is one thing he remembers clear as day from his high school years, it is his first end-of-term exam. How he and Izuku went up against a barely inconvenienced All Might playing villain.

And how All Might punched him in the stomach so hard, he could not shit right for three days.

That will not happen a second time.

“Let’s do our best, everybody!” Kirishima yells with a pumped-up fist.

._._. **All For One’s POV** ._._.

The sounds of medical instruments whine and hum. As the doctor finishes his routine assessment, he turns off the ceiling lights, so only the glow of several computer screens is left. On the screen in front of him, he watches his student complain to the attendant noumu.

He is angry that his five seconds of fame have been dwarfed by the Number Four Hero, Best Jeanist, and the Build-A-Beaver Workshop scandal. Before the news was aired, every outlet was talking about the Villain Alliance. Even when articles tied the actions of Tomura Shigaraki to the Hero Killer Stain, they always strayed back to the mystery of the Villain Alliance.

He is not bothered by the shift in public attention, though. The news was giving his student a big head.

“I never thought the hero killer would get captured,” he says to the doctor. “However, he served his purpose to an extent.”

The hero killer garnered a following over the years as his killing spree of heroes awed the underbelly of Japan. The crippling of Ingenium boosted his popularity exponentially and dragged him into mainstream visibility.

“The sad souls who only want to run wild and the ones who sympathize with his cause… all sorts of people now seek the Villain Alliance as a place where they may pull the lid off their impulses. All because Shigaraki *paid tribute* to the notorious hero killer. Now, he will serve to unify and supervise these new recruits.”

Unfortunately, there is a small hiccup.

A prediction he did not plan for appeared seemingly out of thin air. A child, unrelated to the foretelling strife between One-For-All and All-For-One, weaseled his way into their fated clash. One who managed to run the hero killer off his determined path of murder and disarray in Hosu. One who managed to get the hero killer arrested, not as a pro hero, but as a beloved vigilante.

That last point is the most frustrating. A “fake” pro hero did not stop the hero killer. An act that would have incited more anger and rage in the gray-minded souls enamored by the hero killer’s ideals. No, a “true” hero-to-be in Stain’s eyes stopped the man. This changed detail cut the number of depraved souls in half, instead adding more self-righteous vigilantes to the streets of Japan. Even All Might himself would have been a better option. Depraved souls would flood the streets like flies to a carcass, believing only All Might could end their reigns of terror.

He has not decided whether the boy will be beneficial or detrimental to his plans yet. The boy is merely living a double life as a hero trainee and a vigilante. He keeps any knowledge of the villains’ existence to himself. Furthermore, his little firefly has not signaled a reason to be concerned.

With the hero killer’s keen interest in him, it is hard to believe the boy harbors the nature of a villain or the potential to be one, regardless of whether he holds his tongue.

He sighs.

No matter. Any thing can be corrected with enough time. He can envision a nice role for Katsuki Bakugou to play.

“I wonder if the kid can do it. I think things will progress better if you step in earlier, Teacher,” the doctor ponders from behind him.

He chuckles softly.

“If that’s so, then patch me up faster, Doctor.”

“If only we laid our hands on Super Regeneration five years sooner! It was a disappointment of a quirk, meaningless after your wounds healed,” the doctor grumbles.

“It’s fine. I will let my student do all the hard work, so that he may become the next *me*,” he says, reaching out a hand to touch the screen. The remnants of the light laugh bleed from his voice, and the corners of his mouth drop. He pulls his hand back, curling his fingers and leaning his chin on the formed fist.

“That child was born warped enough to do so.”

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** ._._.

Recovery Girl is going to be pissed.

Katsuki cannot say he was thrilled to have these “guidance” sessions. He hates when people poke around in his head, trying to pick him apart and tell him what he is or is not. Recovery Girl is not a psychologist, and he knows that. He specifically chose her because he thought it would be difficult for her to get inside his head if she did not know how.

But he did not expect her to try so hard to fit his needs. When he visited the nurse’s office this morning, he noticed the recent addition of several counseling and psychology books on her shelves and desk, thoroughly leafed through with post-it notes sticking out of each book. Maybe she borrowed them from Hound Dog. Maybe she bought them herself. Either way, Katsuki is still an asshole.

He has to take these sessions seriously, or he will make a mockery of her hard work because he requested her over the therapy dog. Unfortunately, they had to cancel this session because he was called to the principal’s office as soon as the lunch period began.

He wracks his brain for a reason he is in trouble, but he falls short. The only plausible explanation is the last conversation he had in the principal’s office—the one held the day of the villain attack at the practical training arena. Nedzu mentioned they would revisit that conversation another day, hoping for Katsuki to provide a better answer as to how he knew how to stop both Kurogiri and the unnamed noumu himself. But this seems abrupt.

Katsuki knocks on the closed office door. Nedzu’s muffled voice replies immediately.

“Who is it?”

“Bakugou.”

“Ah, great timing. Do come in,” Nedzu says.

He slides the door open, a scowl etching across his face as he steps inside.

Confusion quickly washes away his frustration from the crowdedness of the office.

Several people stand around Nedzu’s desk. There is a lanky guy in a too-big suit, the police officer who is friends with All Might, and another police officer. Even more confusing is Hawks in his hero uniform who greets him with an easy smile on his face and a wave of his hand.

The door slams shut behind him.

Katsuki turns instinctively, but a police officer is already standing imposingly behind him, blocking his exit.

“How about you take a seat, Bakugou?” Nedzu offers with a smile.

Oh.

Hero Commission. Police. Pro hero on standby. In case anything happens.

They know.

Heat licks his face, the humiliation of being caught sinking its teeth into his skin. Sweat pinpricks his palms, and he wipes his hands on his pants. He straightens his back, red eyes quickly darting around the room.

There are two floor-to-ceiling windows in the principal’s corner office; however, he is not sure if they are reinforced, considering this is the fourth floor of a hero school. It does not matter. He cannot blast his way out of this office and dodge Hawks’ feathers at the same time. The same goes for knocking out the oaf towering over his back.

No, fuck, running will not help his case. There are consequences to his actions, and he will face them head on.

“I’d rather stand,” Katsuki says in an even tone. His voice sounds calmer than expected. Slower and softer than his heart pumping blood through his ears. Katsuki wipes his hands on his pants. “What’s all of this?”

The lanky man steps forward, smoothing down his suit. He looks almost bored in this situation, which irks Katsuki. Here he is trying not to panic, and this guy thinks the end to his short hero career is another Tuesday.

“Yes, pleasantries. You probably don’t know me, but I’m Yokumiru Mera. I’m in charge of hero student and trainee affairs at the Hero Public Safety Commission. Normally, you’d see me supervising the provisional hero license exam, but you’re a special case, so you get the pleasure of meeting me early,” Mera says, almost begrudgingly near the end.

The police officer steps forward next, reading from a thick folder in his hands.

“I am Detective Tsukauchi,” Tsukauchi greets with a curt nod, a brief break between formalities and business. “Katsuki Bakugou, you have been charged with several counts of vigilantism, assault, obstruction of justice, and deliberately withholding information on the activities of a known serial killer and criminal organization. We have collected ample evidence pinning you as the identity of the vigilante referred to as ‘Ground Zero.’ These criminal acts are punishable by law, and as a sixteen-year-old male, you could face up to four years in a juvenile prison and over ten years in an adult prison, pending case reevaluation. As we have pardoned your actions during the Villain Alliance raid of Yuuei, you will not be charged for self-defense.”

He stays quiet.

“I am a little surprised,” Nedzu says. “I can’t say vigilantism was a top suspicion of mine, but after consulting both Mr. Mera and Mr. Tsukauchi, coming to this conclusion was inevitable. Ground Zero became a fairly high priority case of the Hero Commission’s crackdown on vigilantism once we began talking.”

Katsuki silently stares at the tea mug sitting on the principal’s desk. What can he say? The detective covered everything from the perspective of the law. Katsuki knew what he was getting into the crazy idea popped into his head. He knew. And yet, the promises of sanity over night terrors, taking hold of the remnants of his pro hero life, the opportunity to be a hero again… outweighed today’s outcomes.

The silence drags, and the three men share a look.

“If you’re wondering whether Ms. Usagiyama informed us of your identity or not, she stayed silent until the end, which is smarter than outright lying if she was considering the repercussions of her involvement. It seems you learned a thing or two from her,” Mera drawls.

Katsuki’s head snaps up so fast, his neck cracks.

“What the fuck did you do to her?” he spits, startling the police officer behind him with his vitriol.

A cautious hand touches his shoulder, and Katsuki feels every muscle in his body tighten. He grabs the burly hand and flips the man over his shoulder. The wind knocks from the officer’s lungs as his back slams onto the hard ground. Katsuki twists and secures his arm in a warning hold, keeping his head pressed onto the floor with a foot to his throat.

“Whoa!” Hawks exclaims. He enters Katsuki’s field of view, hands hanging loosely from his pants pockets. “How about we calm down. Rumi’s fine. She’s on paid leave until we sort out your situation. Don’t break a guy’s arm over it, yeah?”

When Katsuki glances at the pro hero, he notices the five red feathers floating around his person. He curses under his breath, slowly releasing the police officer and half-raising his hands in surrender. The man scrambles to his feet, wheezing slightly. Looking between the pro hero and Katsuki, he sends Katsuki a dirty glare before returning to his position in front of the door.

Hawks laughs and pats Katsuki’s back. Katsuki would like to pretend his shoulders did not jerk upon contact, but he knows the pro hero felt it. The feathers circle around him before returning to Hawks’ wings.

“Man, you’re tense.”

Is he not supposed to be?

Katsuki breathes deeply, his wrung lungs barely allowing the gesture. He tries again. He needs to get his emotions in check and think rationally. This is his future on the line.

But the sketchiest government organization just told him they have been keeping tabs on his vigilante activities. He should have questioned why he never ran into another vigilante at night. Why it seemed like the pro heroes stopped chasing him after Kamui Woods' attempt. Were they watching him all this time, and now they have the means to strike in a controlled, public setting?

Pro heroes in the future deal with the Neo Hero Public Safety Commission through designated reconnaissance tours for nefarious activity or commission-sanctioned missions. Izuku and Shouto preferred the reconnaissance tours, but Katsuki disliked that type of hero work. Of course, recon is important to discover new criminal operations, but those tours are boring as hell and can last up to a year at a time. Katsuki refuses to be away from the action for that long. He can gather intel on his own terms.

So, when a commission-sanctioned mission dropped on his desk, he took it, even when the majority of them had the same flavor: group infiltration. Katsuki sometimes wonders if he has a second quirk. He knows how villainous he can appear, and Izuku really does work miracles to smooth his sharp edges in public, but for that reason, villains obsess over recruiting him. When the commission gained intel of a new criminal organization, they fed them whispers of the Number 3 Hero being tired of the dog and pony show. Tired of pretending to be better than all the other dirty pros trying to survive in the field. Tired of holding back.

It is useful trick, blinding villains with the possibility of owning the Symbol of Victory. He rarely has to change himself beyond his interest in turning to crime. His authenticity makes him trustworthy. Easy to confide in. And once the organization silently detonates from the inside, his conflicted feelings grow just a bit more.

Why was it so easy for villains to trust him?

It did not matter in the end. Best Jeanist rejected all commission-sanctioned infiltrations after he temporarily lost his hands to a terrorist organization aware of their intentions.

Now, the Neo Hero Commission has their own wrinkles to iron out, but at least they have a rotating board of active and retired pro heroes scrutinizing their every move. The current Hero Commission does not have that fail safe measure.

He should be tense. He should be skeptical. But he needs to stop showing his paranoia on his face.

Katsuki breathes deeply.

"Then, what *is* this?" Katsuki finally speaks again. He looks at Tsukauchi. "I'm not in quirk-dampening handcuffs. I'm not being brought to the station to be interrogated. Are you arresting me or not?"

"Bakugou, your stint as Ground Zero saved the residents of Musutafu on 74 different occasions. Your most notable actions are closing the Night Stalker incidents, stopping a transport van associated with the Build-A-Beaver Workshop human trafficking scandal, and preventing Hero Killer Stain from murdering Mr. Jiro Matsuda, formerly known as Firecracker," Tsukauchi says, glancing at his folder again.

“That’s not an answer.”

Nedzu softly chuckles behind his paw.

“Hero students do not achieve this level of experience and success within their first year of high school,” the principal says deliberately as if speaking to a small child.

“And you’re right. I wouldn’t need to be here if you were getting arrested,” Mera points out. “It would be criminal to let you rot in jail.”

“Approach this conversation from a less defensive position, my dear boy,” Nedzu advises, folding his paws together. “From suspension to days of rest, you have missed more school days in this first term of high school than your entire middle school career. And all because you favor your vigilante alter ego over your studies.”

“My grades are fine,” Katsuki argues. It is hard to fail something he has already done, and his academic prowess is perfectly intact.

“Bakugou, my point is, if you are bored with the Yuuei curriculum, consider Mr. Mera’s opportunity to pursue the *exciting* high school career you seem to crave,” Nedzu says.

“At this rate, you’re practically throwing yourself in jail. We believe the best way for you to stay on the straight and narrow is through a change in guidance. I’m here to invite you to the Hero Commission’s Next Heroes Traineeship. This program has bred amazing heroes, one who is standing in this room as we speak,” Mera explains.

“I didn’t know you guys had a program.”

“We don’t advertise it. If the Hero Commission deems you qualified, we contact you. Since you’ll be training directly with the commission, you will automatically bypass mandated requirements to become a pro hero, such as licensing exams. I’d say it’s pretty advantageous compared to your average hero student,” Mera clarifies.

Katsuki breaks the law, and the governing body selects him for a private program for heroes. *Right*.

He will take that seat now.

Honestly, he should pat himself on the back for a job well done. He managed start his commission-mandated bullshit ten years earlier than expected.

He drops into the armchair, absently tapping his fingers on the rounded arms.

“Does the poster boy have anything to add?” Katsuki asks, turning his attention to Hawks. Mera immediately twists his head to look at the pro hero, his puffy hair obscuring his expression from Katsuki. Hawks’ eyebrows shoot up, his smile widening in amusement.

“I can safely say that I wouldn’t be a pro today without the Hero Commission,” Hawks says smoothly. “We’re sort of similar, kid, since you don’t have other options.”

“I advise you to accept the offer, Bakugou,” Nedzu says. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience rarely offered to students. And you especially need it if you want to become a pro hero.”

“No, I got the message,” Katsuki snaps, leaning back in his seat. He presses his cheek into a propped up hand. “This or jail.”

Mera shrugs his shoulder. He does not deny the accusation. On the other hand, Nedzu does not look like he agrees; he looks almost unsure.

“Shall we invite your parents and homeroom teacher to join our conversation and discuss the details?” Mera asks instead. “We wanted to be on the same page before involving other important parties. Wouldn’t want to reveal your vigilantism to your dear parents.”

“The old hag’s left for work, but knock yourself out getting ahold of them during the rush of the season.”

Wait.

Belatedly, something clicks in his mind.

“Are you pulling me out of Yuuei?”

Mera cocks an eyebrow.

“Is that not a given?”

The tiny explosions pop in his hands before he can stop them.

“Motherfucker!”

Chapter End Notes

Katsuki really begged and pleaded to stay in a school that dropped him anyways.

Note A: During the noumu attack, Midoriya used the exact same tornado kick on the noumu that Bakugou used when they worked on Full Cowling together.

Note B: Similar to required terms of military service in some countries, the Neo Hero Commission has missions it will officially order pro heroes. Not just Bakugou. They take the form of reconnaissance tours or commission-mandated missions. Midoriya and Todoroki do them too, but they do recon tours (to Bakugou's knowledge). The commission-mandated missions are selective in which pro hero must do them, and Bakugou typically gets group infiltration missions, not because he wants them, but because they tend to be successful (or they used to be).

Note C: The Hero Commissions was dismantled and reformed as the Neo Hero Commission with a board of active and retired pro heroes overseeing their activities. This occurred around the time Bakugou was a third year or just graduating Yuuei.

‘Cause in the moment I—

Chapter Notes

> Last time, the Hero Commission connect the dots on the identity of Ground Zero and confront the man-child himself, giving Katsuki an ultimatum.
>
> Song title is from “Like to Be You” by Shawn Mendes and Julia Michaels.
>
> *Tentative Chapter 20 Post Date: Definitely August 2022* Something shocking happened in the manga, and now this fic is on permanent hiatus. JK haha I’m just a suffering adult. I’ll update sooner or later. When you least expect it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

._._. **Shouta’s POV** ._._.

If someone asks Shouta to define a moment, he thinks of taking a nap.

A moment is a brief intermission between his nightly hero work and his daily teaching duties, where he can collect the thoughts wandering around the back of his mind. Thoughts he may have noted that same day or a month ago.

Moments tend to arrive on the days Hizashi picks him up for their morning Yuuei carpool. The bass of an ear-bleeding playlist pulses through his body, and his friend’s mouth runs a mile a minute to catch him up on anything and everything. Shouta finds peace amiss the chaos and shuts his eyes.

Unfortunately, there were not enough moments for him to collect, organize, and solve every thought floating about his mind, and Katsuki Bakugou slipped through his hands.

Shouta started to work on the boy when he set up weekly guidance sessions with Chiyo. Directly before and after that, the Sports Festival and the field internships occurred. Other students needed his attention as well. Apart from scheduling time for his students’ parents to scream at him for the attack on his class at the practical training arena, he was pleasantly surprised when Uraraka approached him to discuss pro hero offices that would train her best in hand-to-hand combat. He was almost touched when Hitoshi Shinso, the kid from the Department of General Education, reached out to him a couple of days ago, fumbling over a training request until his determination steadied his voice. His determination to become a hero.

Physical therapy took up more time than Shouta anticipated. He needed to get back into top shape after getting his bandages removed. He narrowly escaped needing glasses or contacts to continue his line of work. The period between the Sports Festival and the students’ field internships was spent reintroducing his body to the long nights of patrol, reconnecting with his informants, and gathering information on new whispers of interest.

One of his informants was sitting on something with potential. Quite the obsessive researcher, she dug up records on a couple of crooks who got away in the Build-A-Beaver Workshop scandal. Something as sensitive as this must be approached with caution, and he needs to connect with the

Genius Office and the Musutafu Police to silently reopen the investigation. Given Best Jeanist's own meticulousness, Shouta wonders if it was ever truly closed at all, only appearing so to appease the public.

Shouta sighs deeply, massaging the back of his neck.

So, yes, he took a bit longer than expected to reconvene with Bakugou. He planned to start working on the boy's diminishing self-preservation in high-stress situations. Shouta has meager evidence to prove it, but the more protective or defensive the boy feels, the more reckless he seems to get in the face of immense danger.

Bakugou seems like the type of hero to carefully plan out his actions, similar to one of his field mentors. Through the few hero exercises his students have had so far, the boy knows how to take his own safety into account and make sure he wins. Shouta will consult with All Might and future guest teachers to increase the difficulty of their foundational heroics exercises. However, the more protective he feels, the more leeway he gives his own safety to ensure victory. How else would he have thought to attack a dangerous villain in the most lethal way the second the villain was distracted?

Well, it is all speculation on his part anyways. Shouta recalls listening to Kirishima's recorded comments on Bakugou's actions and attitude during the villain attack.

"Manly. He was really manly. So cool. I mean, Bakugou kept his cool the entire time—for most of the time. When Midoriya was in imminent danger, he slipped, but before that, he was really cool. He seemed to know exactly what to do, which was really comforting. I feel bad for saying this, but a tiny part of me was relieved when he stopped me from supporting him. I wanted to go, don't get me wrong, and I hate that Bakugou didn't have any back up. I wanted to help him, and I sure as hell wasn't leaving the arena without him. But a part of me wasn't confident enough. Bakugou looked like he had the villains all figured out, and I just felt… in the way and unprepared."

"Kirishima, you were very brave during this attack, so don't beat yourself up. In my opinion, your inaction was a better choice for your safety than Bakugou's excessive action."

"That's… sure."

"Is that everything you'd like to say?"

"…"

"What is it Kirishima?"

"There's just one thing… I couldn't process it at the time, but now that things have calmed down, it was weird. I don't know how to explain it, but Bakugou was really focused for someone who looked really unfocused. Well, maybe not unfocused, but… distant? No, like… void. Of emotions, I mean. Until Midoriya, and then he kind of… slowly detonated? He was too cool with everything else… Kind of cold. Everyone acts different in the face of danger! And Bakugou's calmness was really comforting. But also, concerning? I'm sorry, I'm not making sense. Forget it… Is he going to get in trouble?"

Kirishima has good instincts. Although he did not articulate himself well, he still picked up on something no one else did. Shouta needs to talk to him about his lacking self-confidence and self-esteem though. It seems to have gotten much worse after the Sports Festival and his tournament

fight with that 1-B kid. He is not sure if his field internship with Fourth Kind helped at all even though Kirishima is the type to look up to chivalrous and "manly" personalities. Maybe this student will actually talk with Hound Dog.

But he needs to stick to one problem at a time.

Shouta wishes he witnessed the events with a better eye, but he was occupied fighting the mob of villains barreling towards his students. Either way, Kirishima's comments are insightful. If Shouta can better understand how Bakugou thinks and operates, then he can correct it before it is too late.

He thought he would have more time. Yesterday's revelation still gives him heartburn.

Shouta cannot say he ever had a student that made him feel so exhausted. He was called to Nedzu's office near the end of lunch, surprised that Bakugou was sitting inside already with Detective Tsukauchi, pro hero Hawks, and Chief Mera of the Hero Commission. The boy was defensive; his head was bowed, fingernails dug into his crossed arms, and feet pressed him deeper into Nedzu's comfy armchair.

Only two students have been plucked out of Yuuei and into the Hero Commission's selective programs. The names change with each student. He was sure the last program was called, "Heroic Hearts," or something tiring like that. Both of those students were nearly graduated, and one of them was regarded as the genius of the Department of Support.

How could he have expected the commission to target Bakugou so early into his hero studies? Shouta knew the villain attack on his class put the boy under a watchful eye. Nedzu was too keen on understanding how Bakugou figured out how to stop two highly dangerous villains. And Bakugou was not giving much of an answer at the time.

For the migraine Mera gave him, Shouta wishes he was able to push Bakugou's official departure from Yuuei further than after his first term. The man was overly keen on snatching the boy away immediately, and that thought alone was too much for Shouta.

Internships, summer training, school festivals, *friends*—these programs are meant to start after high school because they erase those priceless experiences from a hero trainee's life. It is not an advantage to bypass high school; it is a detriment. Bakugou needs those experiences. Shouta does not care how many private tutors or once-in-a-lifetime training opportunities they will provide. The end result is a hero molded by the Hero Commission, not a hero molded by their own aspirations.

However, Bakugou must attend an orientation and trial day sometime in June to ease his transition. Mera argued for it even though he plans to have the boy in his grasp in a little over a month.

Although Shouta could not tear his student from the Hero Commission's grasp, the frustration stinging his face comes not only from the program or Nedzu allowing this transaction of students, but also the student himself.

These programs are meant for third years not first years. They are meant for the cream of the crop. Shouta knows the villain attack put Bakugou on the Hero Commission's radar, but one event is not enough to warrant their actions. Even Bakugou's field internship activities, stopping a villain on patrol and witnessing the arrest of Hero Killer Stain, are not enough.

At the end of it all, Shouta had confronted Nedzu about his apparent dismissal of a rising student, and he only smiled.

“He keeps surprising me. I expected more of a fight from your student,” Nedzu says. “I cannot stop my graduating students from entering programs or taking job opportunities from Hero Commission poachers, for a lack of a better word. They are allowed to choose their own future. But, if Bakugou had voiced a strong resistance to his fate, even given his extraneous circumstances, I can easily come up with a few ways to prevent his departure from Yuuei.”

He sips his tea, now cold.

“You are aware of this, but Bakugou has scored remarkably well on the entrance exams, ranked high in your class even though he misses the most school, and caught the eyes of two pro heroes without giving any performance during the Sports Festival. I like students who are already full of aspirations to be heroes, but I love misguided youths even more. The challenge of guiding them to the right path is irresistible. Why wouldn’t I want to keep him in this school?” Nedzu says with a tilt of his head.

“But he has to want to stay. Bakugou has some extraneous circumstances I cannot talk with you about that place him in a tight spot. I may have laid those impending circumstances on him a bit too hard, but someone as headstrong as he should not care. Before you arrived, he began to show some resistance, but it was quickly contained. I only wish to know why! Just what did he concoct in his head to make leaving Yuuei less dreadful?”

There are two missing pieces of information. First, the extraneous circumstances even Nedzu refused to tell him. And second, the reason Bakugou stopped fighting. Shouta knows both will provide the information he needs to solve the mystery as to why Bakugou acts so differently from his surroundings and upbringing. The second meeting after school, including Bakugou’s parents in the news, solidified the reality of losing a student. That brat had two chances to speak up and give Nedzu a reason to fight for him, and he sat there, brooding.

Before he could reign his frustration in, Shouta snatched Bakugou’s collar and whispered in his ear.

“If you don’t tell me what you’re hiding, sooner or later, I will drag it out of someone who can.”

Shouta knows he is too late and his moment has passed, but he has a month to fix this.

._._. **Katsuki’s POV** ._._.

Dynamight sits up straight. He slowly clasps his gloved fingers together atop the round conference table, cracking his neck as he rolls his head back and forth in a half circle. A single lightbulb hangs above the conference table. Its light barely reaches the ends of the tabletop, drawing only the front of his body into its luminescence. The rest of him melds into the darkness.

A chair scrapes the concrete floor.

The Kid clumsily climbs onto his chair, using it as a ledge to take his seat on the white table. He crosses his legs and places the orange and black controller in his lap. The light fully illuminates his body, making the bright colors of his All Might onesie pop.

“Don’t sit on the table,” the pro hero chastises.

“I can’t see from the chair!” the child yells back.

Dynamight kisses his teeth, but he accepts the excuse. If he fights with the child, he will never see the end of it.

Across the table, a hand quietly emerges from the darkness and taps the top of the table. The hand is smaller than Dynamight's, but larger than the Kid's. It stays on the table.

"Let's start," Dynamight says, looking in the direction of each participant. "The purpose of this meeting is to discuss our handling methods of recent events."

The Kid groans.

"Volunteering?" Dynamight asks. A thinly veiled venom seeps from his voice. "You are our biggest problem as of late."

The Kid scrambles to his feet. The controller tumbles to the tabletop.

"Me?" the child exclaims incredulously. "I'm the only one pulling weight around here!"

Dynamight opens a black folder, one that seems to have phased up from the tabletop, and he smooths out its contents.

"No, you're pulling too much weight. You've gone rogue. This is a team effort, and you refuse to listen to my orders. Letting your guard down. Acting rash. Blowing up at the littlest things. It's childish," he says.

The Kid bristles at his words.

"At least I make decisions! If you're supposed to be barking orders, how come all you've been giving me lately are vague directions? You lost your edge, oh Great Explosion Murder God of Diarrhea," he argues, scraping his tongue against his teeth in disgust when "diarrhea" spits from his mouth.

"Read my lips: you don't make the decisions. I can't help if you're too stupid to understand," Dynamight spits, but sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. Now, that was childish. He reigns in his insults; pulls back on his anger. "No. If this is a team effort, then fine, we're both at fault."

"You're stupid!"

"Stay on track—"

"You're so stupid, you can't even use the controller. Only I can! You can only yap in my ear like the annoying old man you are."

"Kid—"

"And it's so annoying. Do this! Do that! Stop this! Stop that! And then your insistent barking turns all weird," the Kid shouts, huffing heavy breaths. He stares at the pro hero until his chest slows to an even rhythm.

"What are you talking about? I've given nothing but clear orders. I tell you exactly what to do, and you the absolute extreme," Dynamight says, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

“You give nothing but garbled garbage,” the Kid hisses, but “garbled garbage” makes his mouth quiver. He almost loses grasp of his anger. He shakes his head like a wet dog. “And now I barely even need you. He doesn’t even want you anymore.”

Dynamight narrows his eyes. His black mask scrunches around his face a bit.

“That’s not true. He’s just confused. That makes it all the more important for you to listen to me.”

The child throws up his hands, small sparks popping in the air.

“And I’m saying I don’t hear you! What’s not clicking, old man?”

The pro hero sighs heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose and leaning his elbow onto the table. The action tests the limits, and he feels the darkness tugging on his back.

“I hear you, okay? There’s a disconnect. Something’s shutting me out,” he says. After a moment, he looks at the child. “We need to remind him what’s important, or he’ll end up losing at this rate. He’ll end up alone.”

The Kid quiets. He looks down at his feet and stoops to grab the tumbled controller. His lips purse.

“It’s not his fault he can’t remember. And the only ones who can help are gone.”

Scratching screeches in the air. The grating noise of sharp nails on metal unnerve the other two participants.

Dynamight’s spine snaps straight. The Kid slaps his hands over his ears. The controller drops.

“I hate that goddamn sound!” the Kid screams, dropping to a squat with his head pressed to his knees. “Make it stop!”

The single hand resting against the table jerks and retracts into the darkness. The sound of metal banging on metal meshes with the desperate scratching.

The Kid grabs the controller to throw at the third participant.

“Stop!” Dynamight barks. The Kid flinches violently.

“Make it stop, please,” the Kid whines, pressing his hands to his ears again. The controller digs painfully into his ear.

Dynamight grimaces and looks at the table. The sounds dig into the back of his head, scraping his skull as if trying to escape. Or push him further into the darkness.

“I can’t do anything in this state,” he says through a tight mouth. “The more you focus on it, the worse it gets. You know this. Be glad it’s still contained after your little stint in Yokohama.”

“That wouldn’t—I wasn’t—He was still—I only helped a little—” the Kid fumbles over his words, shutting his eyes and screwing his mouth shut.

Dynamight shuffles through the papers in front of him.

“I’m doing the best I can with what’s left, and he appreciates it. I know he does,” the Kid speaks in a small voice.

“There’s more left than he’s willing to admit. He’s just confused,” Dynamight replies. “He needs me even if he rejects me. I can clear his head.”

“You make him sick,” the Kid says. “You’re not what he wanted to be.”

The scratching echoes.

“I give him purpose.”

·_·_·

(Flashback: Year 2028)

Every time Eijirou tells the story, he exaggerates it a little bit more. He loves to tell Katsuki’s interns because they turn to Katsuki with glittery, disgusting sparkles in their eyes, and that makes him burst out laughing.

Katsuki thinks it was a typical day. Miruko challenged him to their game as soon as he touched down in Narita after being away for four consecutive years at his fellowship across Asia. Even though he lost, Miruko would argue he won in the end with all of the free publicity he received.

“Kid!” Miruko exclaims when she spots Best Jeanist and him exiting the departure area. She raises her hand to wave. “Good to see you again!”

Katsuki grins wide and high-fives her. Even he can admit how much he missed her energy.

“Can’t believe Japan’s still standing without me here,” he says, looking out the large, floor-to-ceiling windows inside the airport.

“We have a lot of work to do to smoothly transition you from Chinese hero protocol to Japanese hero protocol,” Best Jeanist states. And Katsuki thought the brat kicking his seat on the flight was the only thing that could ruin his mood today.

“I don’t need a ‘How To’ on hero-ing, Jeanist,” Katsuki says, deadpanning.

“We’ll see. You will also need to work with Genuis Human Resources and Public Relations to get your name reintroduced to Japan. No one has heard of Dynamight since the War for All,” Best Jeanist says.

“I know.”

“And stop slouching.”

“I’m not even—” Katsuki cuts his eye at his mentor’s crinkling eyes. “Stop that. You cracking jokes is fucking weird.”

“Never thought I’d see the day!” Miruko laughs, smacking Katsuki’s back a couple of times. “But all of that boring stuff can wait. I’m sure you need to stretch your legs, and what better way than our way?”

Her words ignite the competitive fire Best Jeanist could not give him.

"It's been two years since we played the game," he says, and he can feel the grin splitting his face.

"And I recall beating you 47 to 39."

"I think your memory's failing you, Miruko. I've got you beat 47 to 39."

"Doubt it!" Miruko exclaims, her smile growing wicked. "Then let's wipe the slate clean. Zero wins. Zero losses. First one to stop a villain or reach the end of patrol wins."

The cacophony of citizens and tourists fills the area around them. Even as people hurry to their next destination, the whispers and stares are easy to pick out. Miruko is standing in front of them in her hero uniform after all. She must have planned this from the start. Katsuki levels her amused stare with a confident one of his own.

"You're on."

He quickly picks up his hero uniform from baggage claim and changes in the bathroom. Once outside the airport, they picked out their patrol routes, starting and ending in the same place with different means of reaching the finish line at equal lengths.

"Don't give my PR team extra work before they see you again, Bakugou," Best Jeanist warns, but his voice lacks the necessary sternness. "I will touch base with you tomorrow. Get some well-deserved rest, all right?"

"Uh-huh," Katsuki says offhandedly, memorizing his route as he fixes his improved and sleeker grenadier bracers to his gloves. "Let's do this."

He and Miruko move to a more open area, stretching and taunting each other. Miruko kicks him out of his press handstand. Katsuki trips her before she can do her test hops. Their competitiveness feed off of each other, only to grow more outrageous with time. Katsuki can already guess Best Jeanist will have questions about his time in India with Miruko—probably how the both of them are still allowed in the country. He had asked before, but their conversations never strayed from the lessons and skills Katsuki learned.

He swears they were both model heroes, enough so that the local heroes are happy to contact him for additional support if needed.

Best Jeanist reluctantly counts down for them as the neutral party.

Three.

Two.

One.

Boom.

Katsuki immediately takes to the air, soaring away from the parking lots and highways surrounding the airport and towards the first street on his route. His eyes dart for every little thing that looks out of place. He has gotten better at thoroughly scanning his environment in a matter of seconds, but there is always room for improvement.

He passes housing units with construction signs that look weathered. The road he turns on has a large crack that meanders into the sidewalk. It was filled in, leaving an elongated bump in its place. One of the stores seems to have recently reopened, with its fancy new sign and displays. The roof looks like it is threatening to fall any day now from his perspective. He wonders how it was approved to reopen in the first place.

But then he hears it.

The tantalizing echoes of a fight.

It is his victory, Miruko.

Katsuki rolls in the air, turning and adding force to his explosions to propel him faster. And as soon as he passes a tall office building, the area opens, and he spots his prize.

Smoke billows lightly from the space surrounding a huge hole in the concrete; however, it is not difficult to see through it. Katsuki squints. There are about ten pro heroes on site. Some are helping injured civilians out from under the rubble of destroyed buildings. The rest are trying to fight the huge villain or at least corral him away from the people.

The villain is at least a story tall, his body packed with tight muscle and thick skin. He shrieks, and the force of his yell seems to push the smoke away from his body. His rampage is not slowed by the heroes, rather he is chucking them like baseballs.

A news helicopter sharply pulls up to avoid the unravelling chaos as the villain throws another pro hero out from the crater and into a broken building.

Katsuki scowls. His heartbeat quickens at the seriousness of the situation. He takes a second to think.

The villain looks bigger after grabbing that hero. At least a couple of feet taller. The thickness of his skin seems to have increased as well. Without enough evidence, he cannot support his hypothesis, but it is possible the villain is sucking energy from everyone he touches, which could explain why these heroes cannot contain him. They do not have the strength to do so.

He wonders if the opposite is also true then. If the villain can expand his muscle mass and height with each victim, will he pop like a balloon if Katsuki hits him hard enough?

He is determined to find out.

As his fellowship dragged on, Katsuki developed many special moves he incorporates into his flight, ranged tactics, and close-ranged fighting style. He can think of at least three ways to hit this villain. But for a big dolt like this, the best move is always his first special move. The one he has sculpted into a work of art.

Explosions rip through his hands as he twists his body in the air, turn faster and faster until only a blazing cyclone is visible.

He soars.

He soars over the huddle of injured civilians staring in awe. Over the pro heroes pulling each other out of the crossfires. Over the news helicopter, twisting to get a better video.

He smashes into the villain in a blazing inferno.

Howitzer Impact.

Katsuki finds his hypothesis is true.

On impact, the villain deflates into the size of an adult man, pressing into the cratered concrete as if the world's gravity is focused solely on him. A gust of air explodes from him, obliterating the rest of the smoke in the blink of an eye. The villain's breath catches in a sad attempt before his eyes roll into the back of his head.

Katsuki stumbles on his feet, barely sticking the landing, and turns around in a defensive position, ready to attack the villain again.

Disappointment screws his mouth into a frown.

"Oi, oi, oi. Don't tell me that's it?" Katsuki gripes, climbing out of the crater. He throws the unconscious villain onto the pavement with a thud. "You all chalked him up to be a real challenge."

For a moment, everything is quiet. Eijirou would wax poetic—in between snickers—and say that the man named Dynamight took everyone's breath with his indisputable victory.

He scans his surroundings. He practiced that move in and out of the field countless times, he made sure to keep the additional damage to a minimum and contained within the crater. Plus, it looks like all of the injured civilians and pro heroes were moved from the immediate area beforehand.

Ha. If the dumbass villain moved from the crater, he would not have used his Howitzer.

Katsuki pulls off the glove on his right hand to quickly tap on his phone and hold it to his ear.

"Pay up, Miruko. I won."

Miruko laughs over the line.

"I'm guessing you didn't see my text message. Nice try though!"

"Oh, goddamn it!" Katsuki curses. "Fine. Name your price."

Before he can hear his second mentor's reply, news reporters swarm his person.

"That was amazing!"

"That was incredibly dangerous! What if you hit a civilian?"

"Are you a new pro hero? What's your TAID number? I don't think I've seen you before."

"Thoughts on upstaging the heroes already here?"

"Shut up!" Katsuki snaps at them, turning his back to the crews as he focuses on the phone in his hand. "What did you say?"

"Wow! Such attitude! You're live on the big screen, you know? You should wave!"

Ah, fuck.

"Jeanist's going to kill me," Katsuki says, lowering his voice so it is not broadcasted across Japan. "So, you want me to wave to the camera?"

Something akin to pride wheedles its way into Miruko's voice, whether she realizes it or not.

"I actually wrote crepes in the text, but now I want a declaration to all of Japan. Don't keep them waiting! Tell them who's arrived," she says.

"Ha!" Katsuki grins before hanging up the phone and turning back to the peeved news crews. He grabs the edge of the news camera angling it to his face.

"Name's Dynamight, and I'm your next Number One Hero."

·_·_·

Ice clinks against glass in his whiskey.

Katsuki continues to languidly swirl the half-finished drink, his head propped up on the back of his hand and his eyes boring into black ink on the first page of his notebook.

Ever since the Villain Alliance attacked his class and triggered memories long lost, Katsuki has been remembering little things this past month. He won the Sports Festival his first year, but he was pissed at Shouto because of how he won. All Might carried him to the nurse's office from her temporary field location after the first end-of-term exam. Katsuki woke up halfway through the walk, but he was too embarrassed to let his idol know. The snot-nosed brats of his remedial provisional license exam, and meeting Camie for the first time. Some memories make him smile inwardly. Most turn his mood sour.

He is unsure if the class attack is the reason his memories are unlocking one by one, or if being in the past for so long is finally catching up to his mind. He can definitely notice his temper and lack of patience reverting back to what it once was a decade ago. Little, childish things setting him off when the most they should invoke is an eye twitch. The reins of control slip further in his grasp.

Beep~

His phone sounds a missed call. He ignores it and returns to his notebook.

Katsuki's Events Notebook

1. *Sludge villain incident [added: Deku gets OFA]*
2. *Yuuei entrance exams*
3. *Graduated middle school*
4. *[added: Shigaraki attacks the class—still the Villain Alliance]*
5. *Did I win the Sports Festival my first year? [added (revised): yes, but removed this time]*
6. *[added (new): fought Stain during field internship]*
7. *[added (new): kicked from Yuuei—scheduled to join HPSC traineeship after first term]*

With this change, there's a break in my old timeline.

Previous Events, from memory:

8. *Kidnapped by League of Villains [added (revised): summer break of first year]*
9. *Provisional license failure and remedial hell*
10. *First year; term three—internship with Endeavor Agency*
11. *The War for All*
12. *Yuuei offered Helping Hands program to outsource students for post-war aid*
13. *Protests against heroes occur across Japan*
14. *Secured term internships with Genius Office*
15. *"Recovery" Act is promulgated*
16. *Graduated high school*
17. *Future Heroes fellowship stationed in India (Miruko) and China (Jeanist)*
18. *Returned to Japan*
19. ~~*Take over*~~ *Work at Genius Office*
20. *"Ms. Hero Resources" and her agendas are in full swing: All Heroes Program, Pro Heroes Union, Transparency Act*
21. *Symbol Smashers.*
22. *Drug bust gone wrong; kingpin bodyguard with red yaksha mask*

Katsuki sips his whiskey.

The Hero Commission traineeship is the wildcard. The most poignant unknown of this timeline that throws a wrench in his involvement in certain events. He is slated to start the traineeship the summer after his first term at Yuuei. If he is in some stuffy room with government slimebags, then he is not playing damsel in distress for the newly-formed League of Villains at summer camp.

He sighs and slides his forehead into his hand instead, his head suddenly feeling heavy.

Katsuki is not sure if the League of Villains would have kidnapped him at the summer training camp anyways. He recalls the reason they were attracted to him, and he rewrote it with a less enticing performance. He probably would not have been able to bark at a crowd like he did in his teenage years without humiliation sizzling his skin. Or if he could take a kid seriously in a tournament fight. The only reason he has going for him is the way he acted when he was not even conscious. Blacked out, Katsuki helped show the villains their weaknesses and taunt Shigaraki into anger. Maybe Shigaraki will want to kidnap him out of spite.

Maybe not.

Which is the only good thing about this stupid Hero Commission traineeship. If Katsuki is not seen as an excellent addition to the League of Villains, or a threat to be neutralized personally, he will need another entry point. Or a spy.

Hawks.

That man is the only reason Katsuki did not fight every single person in the principal's office to stay at Yuuei. The gamble over being kidnapped is too risky. He needs a surefire connection with the villains, and Hawks figures that out. The next best course of action would be to, first, figure out if Hawks can be trusted with future information and, second, figure out how to work with him on his infiltration mission as an informant. Even if Katsuki is not 100% sure of the future now, he still knows everything about the villains. Their personalities, motives, histories, strengths, and

weaknesses. And he is sure their overarching goals to destroy hero society and All Might will never change.

Hawks was a phenomenal spy in the events leading up to the war. Even if Katsuki has experience infiltrating villain organizations, he never had to change who he was besides his need to be a hero. He will never consider himself a spy; those organizations were dumb and too keen on controlling him. They were missions only he could complete. However, he does not know if he can trust the hero to keep information from the Hero Commission.

Beep~

And if the villains do attack the summer camp? Although they came to kidnap him, they also wanted to murder Izuku and realized Tokoyami would be a great investment.

Katsuki still plans to meet with three pro heroes he thinks he can trust, or learn to trust, and he will tell them of this potential attack. It would be best to secretly plant extra heroes and arrest as many of the villains that attempt to storm the camp. Even if the League of Villains decides not to invade the camp, the extra heroes can help his class improve. Not necessarily a loss.

Beep~

Either way, Katsuki needs to set up a meeting before the end-of-term exam, and especially before summer arrives. He does not know if he made the correct choices, he is moving into unknown territory, but repeatedly mulling over his choices in his head only serves to waste time.

He hopes he can meet with these three people. And an additional meeting with a fourth person who he should consider equally important. She has always been important.

Beep—

Katsuki smacks a fist into his phone, a twitch in his eye.

An unknown number keeps calling him. He thought he silenced his phone, but the missed call notification keeps beeping, and the unknown number keeps reaching out. After the fourth failed attempt, he opens his phone to see a string of text messages from the same number.

Unknown: morning sparky!

Unknown: …its mina!

Unknown: kiri hooked me up w ur deets forever ago, remember?

Unknown: r u free rn

What is so important she needs to talk to him now? They will see each other at school in a couple of hours. Honestly, he never expected Ashido to be the type to get up this early in the morning.

He sends her a quick reply.

Katsuki: Unavailable.

Unknown: physically or emotionally

Katsuki blocks her number.

He stares at his phone. Maybe that was too much, but it is too late. He will figure out how to unblock her later. More pressingly, he needs to figure out how to call a meeting with his choices.

They are pro heroes, and although two of them have some semblance of trust in him, it is dwindling. It would be best of he asked one of them to call the meeting. That way, the third pro hero will understand its importance rather than doubt its credibility.

Not even thirty minutes after Ashido bothered him, his phone rings. Kirishima is calling him. Katsuki narrows his eyes but, nevertheless, answers the call.

"What?"

Heavy breathing greets him.

He immediately pulls the phone away from his ear to verify the number.

"What the fuck, Kirishima?" he spits.

The phone barely picks up a voice in the background.

"Mina, he's going to hang up. You have to say something."

Another voice is muffled by someone suffocating the phone.

"Actually hearing his voice is nerve wracking! I even planned a rant about him blocking me and everything. What if I really upset him?"

"He's seriously going to hang up."

"I can hear you," Katsuki says in his loudest voice to make sure the bumbling buffoons heard him.

"Eck!"

Katsuki is not sure which brat choked, but his patience is running thin.

"Bye—"

"Are you mad?" Ashido's voice is unsure and small. She never sounds like this. He dislikes it. *"At me?"* she adds belatedly.

"Why?" Katsuki asks, drawing out the word. His eyebrow quirks upwards.

"You know. Because of class. Because I talked too much, and sometimes I talk too much when people don't like me and make everything worse. I don't know… It doesn't happen often," Ashido stops rambling to blow hot air. *"Iida made it sound like you were really mad at me. Like, really mad."*

"What—"

"I was just… no, it's embarrassing now that I think about it. I was teasing. I mean, it's not like we do fun stuff like joke around in class or go to the movies together," Ashido cuts him off in a frantic

need to convince him, but her voice turns sour near the end. He can hear her footsteps over the line, and he wants to laugh at how heavy she must be stomping in a circle. *"...My head just got a little big because we finally got to see something no one else had."*

Wait a minute. The movies?

"Stop!" Katsuki barks when he hears her suck in air. And Ashido's footsteps come to a halt as well. He snickers involuntarily. "I don't know what bullshit Iida is spitting, but I'm not mad at you."

"You blocked me." The small voice returns.

"Because you distracted me. You're *still* distracting me."

"You avoid us like the plague and barely answer the group chat. If you do, it's because Kiri mentioned you. You turn into an escape artist at lunch," Ashido points out. "We were the first ones to accept you when everyone else kept their distance."

Katsuki sighs heavily.

"I don't hate you. I just don't hang around my classmates."

"Liar! You went to the movies with Jirou!"

"One damn time!" Katsuki snaps, but he catches his rising tone in a sharp gasp. He breaths out slowly. "Do you know how hard it was to get those jeans, Racoon Eyes?"

"...No."

"Nearly impossible. I told you guys Jeanist was a proper asshole. And you wanted me to ask the guy for some tailored clothes? Do you know how much begging and extra work I did for those jeans? I don't beg," Katsuki says in an even tone. "Why would I do that for someone I don't like?"

"You love those jeans, Mina. I told you he didn't hate us."

"Kiri. You don't even believe your words. And he only answered the phone when he thought it was you."

He barely catches a soft sniffle. Jesus fucking Christ. He made her cry. Uneasiness tickles the back of his neck and the need to end the call grows stronger.

"Ashido, I'm not mad at you," Katsuki repeats, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Can you give the phone back to Kirishima?"

"Can you eat lunch with us and actively participate in our group chat? I'll add Jirou to it?"

Katsuki wants to argue that adding Jirou is not a bargaining chip, but he would rather end this awkward situation faster. Seriously, how did she get in her head that Jirou and he are the best of friends?

"Fine."

"And shopping! I want to go shopping together."

“Hell no. Do that bullshit with your friends.”

The sniffling comes back full force.

“Fuck. Fine. Yes.”

“Yay~ I’m going to plan the whole day! It’s going to be amazing!”

The shuffle of feet and hands crackle through the phone.

“Uh… hello?” Kirishima’s voice greets him nervously.

“Trick me like this again, and I’ll block you too.”

“Hey—”

Katsuki hangs up and drains the rest of his whiskey.

The constant notifications were annoying, so Katsuki turned them off. Of course, he was not responding. When Katsuki checks his phone, he does not expect several private messages from Kirishima in addition to the million messages in the group chat.

Oh, they changed his chat name again. That is why she called him, “Sparky.” He clicks on the direct messages from Kirishima, skipping to the ones from this morning.

Kirishima: Hey, where’d you go yesterday?

Kirishima: Iida and Yaomomo were trying to make me, Mina, and Jirou apologize for clowning you yesterday, but Mr. Aizawa said you went home early, and we thought maybe visiting would piss you off haha…

Kirishima: Sorry about yesterday. I’ll totally tell you in-person

Kirishima: You never talk to us

Kirishima: seeing you outside of your usual brooding was shocking

Kirishima: In a good way!

Kirishima: But Mina and I shouldn’t have gossiped about coming over. That was wrong, sorry

Kirishima: But you and your mom are basically twins, dude! I didn’t mean it in a bad way. Your mom is really manly, and so is your dad. And seeing you show your emotions is so much better than bottling them up

Kirishima: How come you didn’t tell us about your super cool hero moment in Yokohama?

Kirishima: Or that you set up a double internship? Dude! I wish I thought about splitting my time with two pro heroes

Kirishima: Did you see the hero killer?

Kirishima: I just… wish you would let us in a bit more. We’re friends, right?

Kirishima: I mean, I want to be

Kirishima: But you're more reclusive than I thought

Kirishima: Do you like protein shakes? I'll bring you a protein shake! Are you allergic to anything?

How fragile do they think he is? Yeah, it was annoying, but teenagers are annoying. So, what. They were not clamoring for his fucking favor after they teased him on the bus ride to the practical training arena.

He rolls his eyes, and they land back on the notebook.

His list of past, current, and future events. And yet, they lack emotion. They tell nothing of the relationship hurdles he jumped and the people he loves. The support system built around him, and the ones he provided to others. How equally important the first time he and Eijirou went hiking again when he returned to Japan, and Katsuki realized just how much he hurt his friend with his absence. The first time Izuku showed up at his door with a nightmare fresh on his mind, Izuku still learning how to process it and Katsuki still learning how to be there. The moment the term, "wonder duo," was coined by all of Japan like a heavenly spell against the societal erosion endured from the war.

Katsuki does not hang around his classmates. He does not try to. No matter how much of his antics and mannerisms revert, that will stay the same. He will never look at these teenagers the same. He will never truly shake the pity from his eyes no matter how much he tries not to think of their futures. He will never truly connect with them as he once had because, unbeknownst to them, they are at different stages of their lives. A pro hero does not dream to become what he already is. Or was.

But he is not going to sit here and pretend Kirishima's text messages are not trying to strangle his fucking heart. Katsuki messages him back.

Katsuki: No allergies. Thanks.

The reply pops up before he can lock his screen.

Kirishima: Sweet!

Kirishima: I'm making chocolate banana walnut shakes. It's like drinking banana bread, but manlier.

Kirishima: By manlier, I mean tastier. And not bread-y. I swear it's good. See you in class!

Katsuki barely keeps the pinch on his face from turning into a smile. The struggle is short lived.

Kirishima. Not Eijirou.

Returning to his original task, Katsuki reaches for his glass, only to realize he already finished his drink. He calms his nerves with a deep breath. This is it. He will tell them everything.

He picks up his phone again and dials a number.

"Hey Jeanist, can you do me a huge favor?"

Chapter End Notes

Note A: Omg is this it? Yes, Izuku's POVs are killing me. I rewrote them like five times. I'll need to put them in a separate chapter.

Note B: Concerning the flashback scene, Best Jeanist planned for Bakugou to start at the Genius Office until he made a name for himself again. With Best Jeanist planning to focus more on his growing fashion line and his hero consultant work rather than being in the field fulltime, it was an easy decision to have Bakugou spread the name of the hero agency until he found another hero to take over.

Note C: Mina doesn't have a crush on Katsuki, or anything like that. There aren't romantic relationships in this story. The reason she is embarrassed about her actions (if you didn't get it) is because she only did it to brag that Kirishima and she got to hang out with Katsuki after school and no one else did. Basically, the chance to one-up Jirou's story. It's embarrassing now that she thinks about it.

Note D: Katsuki is only confident in calling Best Jeanist like this because they've established a better mentoring relationship than the dumpster fire that was the first encounter in the past.

If I could put myself in your shoes, then I'd know what it's like to be you (part 1)

Chapter Notes

Last time, Aizawa contemplates his student's motives. An emergency meeting of selves occurs in Katsuki's head. Mina is determined to befriend Katsuki by any means necessary. After months of overthinking and too many interfering events, Katsuki makes a decision to change the future.

This chapter will be in Midoriya's point of view only. Song title is from "Like to Be You" by Shawn Mendes and Julia Michaels.

Edit: Sorry it took so long to upload a chapter. With the holidays coming up, it will hopefully give me more writing time. Or, I'll just scrap my original chapter limit and write shorter chapters.

Tentative Chapter 21 Post Date: January 2023

._._. **Izuku's POV** – Tokyo General after the Noumu Attack ._._.

Like clockwork, he returns to the same dream he has experienced since the Sports Festival. He is not startled by it anymore. It is almost calming in the beginning.

Izuku stands atop an endless body of water. The water mirrors him eerily well, his reflection stretching out from where his toes meet the surface. Only ripples flaw the copied form. A vast, bright sky stretches above him and kisses the water at the furthest Izuku can see. A couple of fluffy clouds reflect upon the water, gradually crawling along their path.

And as soon as Izuku feels himself relax, his shoulders slip and his breath comes easier, the sky darkens to night. If he tilts his head back, stars litter the sky in different colors, sizes, and brightness. They twinkle. They shoot and curve across the sky. They erupt and birth anew in the night. If he tilts his head forward, he sees only himself somehow illuminated in the dark water; the bright lights vanished.

His reflection wavers as the water undulates. It is not easy to continuously stand still. His body gets too twitchy.

He has knelt down and touched the water before; he has attempted to push his hand through. And yet, his reflection pushes back at the same force, refusing his entry in the unknown. Sometimes, he just sits and stares at the night sky. If he stares at the dark water for too long, a fear begins to creep into the back of his mind. He knows he cannot fall through, but the fear tells him something might fight its way out. So, he will keep his head turned towards the show of lights.

Nevertheless, he knows pretty stars or splashing water is not why he keeps having this dream. They will show up, and he will question his sanity again.

Like stars descending from the sky, seven lights surround his reflection in the water and disturb the surface. The eighth light always phases in slowly, hovering in a haze as if it is not meant to be there yet. The lights huddle around his figure like wandering whisps from a campfire, staring at him. Trying to tell him something. But the words never form.

A bright light blinds him.

Izuku jerks backwards, falling onto his butt as he roughly rubs at his scalded eyes. Black dots dance in his vision as if to dab up the white, slowly clearing his vision. He squints and risks looking back at the glowing water.

"What?" he mouths in confusion. Never has Izuku tried to talk in this dream, but even his words come out soundless.

The brightness was not from a singular entity, but from eight additional lights, dimming and forming silhouettes on the other side of the water. The sheer force of their presence knocks away the rounded lights that surrounded Izuku. But, like magnets, the glowing silhouettes absorb his lights, the similar colors coexisting in the same space together. They crowd him—

No. Not him.

He gawks.

It is Izuku's reflection staring back at him. They have the same color of hair, the same curliness to it. They have the same freckles that form diamonds on each cheek. The same roundness to his face.

But…

His hair is long enough to be pulled back into a ponytail. Wilder too. A long scar curls around his cheek and disappears under his chin. And his eyes… He knows his own face, his own facial expressions.

Desperation and loss have never been burned into his eyes like this before.

Izuku would say that he looks older, aged, but the words do not fully capture this version of him. It is not enough. He…

He looks weathered. Eroded.

For a moment, they stare at each other, unmoving and unchanging in the undulating water. Trying to understand what is in front of one another. Then, the eyes of his reflection slowly widen in realization, and Izuku can feel his eyelids move in unison. As if his reflection is controlling him.

His mouth opens. He falters. And a waterfall of words spills from his lips. Not a single sound is made. And after a while, his reflection seems to notice. Confusion rewrites his face. Frustration scratches it out.

A familiar but heavily scarred fist slams into his. Skin just barely separated by the surface of the water.

The action sends a circle of weak waves outward. Izuku wants to jerk backwards, but his reflection holds him in place, hunched over the water. His mouth moves a mile a minute until it just stops. Another fist hits the water, and water lurches upward, spraying Izuku in rain. His eyes wince. As

the water drags down his skin and drips back into the sea, it feels like it is trying to drag him with it.

His mouth moves slowly this time, repeating the same string of words like a broken record, hoping Izuku can piece the question together.

'Is Kacchan alive?'

Even through the waves, Izuku can see—feel—the tears sting his reflection's eyes.

Tightness constricts his throat.

Izuku does not know how to answer.

Izuku flinches violently in his hospital bed.

His foot is still elevated in the hanging cradle, so he cannot move much. His recovery restricts him from rocketing out of the bed and pacing across the floor.

He covers his mouth with his hands, hoping the pressure prevents any sound from seeping out. His breathes stutter out heavily, his heart thundering in his chest. It is in his head. It is all in his head, just like All Might said. These dreams, and even these new developments, of eight lights are all in his head.

Izuku tries to calm himself, holding his breath and breathing out slower, scrunching his eyelids closed and focusing on staticky darkness behind them. It is all in his head.

'Is Kacchan alive?'

A punished whimper breaks free from the smothering cage of his fingers.

Why would he dream of such a question? Why would his subconscious torture him with his childhood friend's actions? And his own? He already feels immensely guilty for choosing between friends. Is this his punishment?

He could have done it, could he not have? He did not have to make a choice of one or the other. Izuku could have dropped everything and taken a taxi to Yokohama the second he saw the video. Then, once he was sure Kacchan was all right, he could have taken the train to Hosu. He could have made it. If only he made the effort. If only he did not second guess himself that night. If only he did not spend hours calling and leaving voicemails and checking the news and scouring local emergency alerts. If only he was a better hero. A better friend.

"Midoriya?" a voice calls in sleep-laden confusion. Todoroki stretches a sigh as he wakes. "Is that you?"

Izuku presses harder on his mouth, his body shaking as his mind screams to get himself under control. He swallows a dry tongue, and sparse spit drags down his throat.

"Mmhmm," is all he can manage. Silence drags for seconds, minutes, and he tries again. "I moved my leg wrong. Everything's fine. Sorry I woke you."

“Okay…”

Todoroki shifts six times before he falls back asleep.

Izuku stays up.

._._. Present Day – Early June ._._.

Like two sides of a coin, when Izuku’s life took a turn for the better, his childhood friend also turned over a new leaf.

Kacchan is strong, defiant, and tenacious. He has been told he will make a great hero since his quirk manifested, and Izuku agreed with each note of praise. It is not a topic of debate. Katsuki Bakugou will be a name to remember, and that is merely a fact.

However, as admirable as he is, Izuku cannot say he ever planned to add “kind” to his list of qualities. Izuku has seen Kacchan act polite to teachers and other adults, but he is never kind, and definitely not to peers he deems lesser than. To Izuku, his “kindness” has always been synonymous with “tolerance.”

“Which seat is mine?”

Midoriya points.

“Thanks.”

“Th-thanks?”

The day *after* Kacchan’s mysterious absence from middle school, he voluntarily thanked him for the first time in their childhood friendship. Sure, Aunty Mitsuki and various teachers have chided and told him to apologize, but Kacchan has never done it out of his own volition. Not to Izuku.

The occurrence was especially jarring since… The day *before* Kacchan’s mysterious absence from school, the boy tripped Izuku into the school pond because he was trailing after him and his friends on the way to the hero merchandise store for the release of new All Might trading cards.

“It is *your birthday, right?”*

Kacchan gifted Izuku a birthday cake with a flavor combination he never tasted before but instantly loved, and he spent the day with Izuku and his mom at the Musutafu Hero Museum. It took Izuku quite a while to wrap his head around that day. That Kacchan tolerated his “uselessness” for an entire day. That Kacchan gave him a gift after a decade of dismissal. The only logical reasoning Izuku could come up with was that Aunty Mitsuki forced him to do it. But then why would she not come herself?

It took months for Izuku to work up the courage and try the flavor combination again, visiting the same café Kacchan did and ordering a cupcake version. He still loves it. It still baffles him.

“This one’s all yours. If you can get this far, you can figure out the rest yourself.”

As much as Kacchan denied it, Izuku was not so delirious that he could not see his childhood friend act as the perfect aide for Recovery Girl in bandaging his injuries after his tournament battle with Todoroki. That Izuku could not identify the notes of panic in Kacchan's stiff brow and disgruntled scowl. And when he grilled Izuku on why he used his quirk the way he did, Izuku came out of the conversation with a whole new way to approach One-For-All. He opened a door.

Izuku never thought Kacchan and he could be friends, never expected it. All Might saw the potential of Izuku's future when Kacchan branded him useless for the entirety of his past. To prove his worth to the closest definition of victory, of greatness, in Izuku's life and surpass him has always been a goal of his. And that chance began. Izuku acquired a quirk to help him stand on his own two feet and follow his lifelong dreams. He can feel it in his bones; he knows, with this change, he and Kacchan can be rivals. They will be rivals. They will fight tooth and nail for the top spot. He knows it.

"That was your first fucking try. You reacted fine; you just need practice. Quit the self-depreciation, and let's go again."

But every instance of kindness, every moment of support in Kacchan's own way, made him wonder. Made him subconsciously expect it. The ridiculous chance to befriend his childhood friend.

Kacchan was the first person to find out about the origins of his quirk. Kacchan was the first person he told when he figured out how to improve his reaction time with One-For-All; the first to test the idea on and iron it out.

Kacchan was the first person he called when he helped stop a villain during his field internship. The first to confide in and vomit his insecurities about Iida and the hero killer.

"Midoriya. Breathe."

Kacchan knew everything about him, and Izuku told him everything so easily. All Might was right. Having someone to talk to other than the man he wants to live up to and one day surpass helps him breathe a bit better.

A friend.

Izuku knew Kacchan was guarding a secret close to his heart. The change in the boy was suspicious and shocking—his newly acquired patience, quietness, self-deterioration, interest in Izuku's wellbeing—there had to be something behind it. At first, Izuku thought it was related to the sludge villain. Then, he thought it was related to One-For-All. And, maybe, both contribute to his change, but they are not secrets. Izuku, and anyone who consumes news media, knows about the sludge villain event, and Izuku knows how Kacchan learned about One-For-All. If that were it, then Kacchan would not act guarded.

He thought, since he could confront Kacchan about his knowledge of One-For-All, if Kacchan could be a pillar of support for him and Izuku could be the same for the other, then the secrets would dwindle between them.

The worst part about being lied to is realizing that, in Kacchan's eyes, Izuku is *still* not worth knowing the truth.

Kacchan was adamant about steering clear of the hero killer. He was adamant about Izuku's safety even when he relented to Izuku's plans to visit Iida. He took Kacchan's caution to heart. Honestly, he was only up so late, scouring the internet for more information on the hero killer in case Iida was looking for the man and did find him. Looking for weaknesses or detriments. And finally, he stumbled upon something new.

In a Heroddit thread about a clash between vigilantes, Izuku realized it was his childhood friend getting stabbed and drugged by a serial killer on a grainy video passed around the internet.

Izuku is not dumb. No matter what his middle school classmates may say, he knows he is not dumb. He saw the similarities between Ground Zero and Kacchan's fighting styles. He saw the similarities in their appearances. The injuries that followed the vigilante of Musutafu's protection. The strokes of long nights painted into Kacchan's face and body.

It was too confusing. Why would Kacchan, someone with a powerful quirk who looked down on those with lesser or no quirks, masquerade as a vigilante assumed to have no quirk? Why would he do something that could jeopardize his sole dream of becoming a pro hero—the number one hero?

But it was a single explosion that forced Izuku to accept it. He may not know Ground Zero, but he knows Kacchan. He knew Kacchan.

That was the gut punch of it. Harder than anything Izuku has ever witnessed. The explosion spread from the phone between his fingertips, under his skin, and into the tissue, so that later, when Izuku came face-to-face with Kacchan the next school day, he was insulted that the boy could not see his burn marks. That to him, Izuku was unchanged. Unaffected by his care and his betrayal.

Izuku knew Kacchan guarded a secret, but he did not expect it to make him feel so betrayed that he could not breathe. How Kacchan was almost stolen from him. How, for nearly 12 hours, Izuku was not sure if he was even alive. How none of his calls went through, his texts left unanswered. How it tore him to choose between running to Kacchan's last known location or visiting Iida in the morning. How relief drilled bitter tears in his eyes when Miruko told him Kacchan sent her. How angry he was when Kacchan asked him why *he* was bandaged.

How could he not trust him? Talk to him? Say anything?

"I just want to make sure my friend is okay. Why can't you understand that?" Izuku had asked.

Because Izuku is the only one who thought they were friends.

·_·_·

Heroddit

h/uncannyvigilante

u/dbsdbs · 1h

[**GZ**] Update: This is harder than I thought.

...I got to give Ground Zero props for being hard to find even though we've practically drawn up a missing person's portrait in this tag. I designed my search based off of what we know, and I already exhausted everyone on the list. Didn't think it'd be this hard, but now it's getting harder with my

new schedule… I'm going to widen the age range on my search. That's the biggest unknown I have. And if that doesn't work, I'll widen the height range next.

I'll get back to you all in a week.

92k upvotes · 876 comments

…

[Recent Comments]

revelryinthedark · 11m

Why are you doing this?

553 upvotes · 20 replies

|| [Best Replies]

|| dbsdbs · 10m

|| *Because it's fun and I'm awake*

|| 2k upvotes · 1 reply

||| revelryinthedark · 8m

||| *Jeopardizing a guy's identity and future is fun?*

|||| dbsdbs · 7m

|||| *I'm not going to out him. I'm only making sure he's alive and reporting that. My search extends to the recently deceased too*

||||| revelryinthedark · 6m

||||| *I don't like this…*

|||||| noragrets · 4m

|||||| *stop being buzzkill or I come for you nest*

||||||| dbsdbs · 3m

||||||| ***Next, dumbass. Chill out.*

·_·_·

"Morning, Deku!"

Uraraka taps him on the shoulder before bouncing into step alongside him.

"Did you finish question three on the math homework yesterday? I think you texted the group you were having trouble," she asks, her cheery smile turning nervous. "I really wanted to send a pic of

my solution, but Iida sent that extra-long paragraph about plagiarism and student conduct and *yeesh*."

Izuku laughs, nodding.

"I think so! It took me a while though. Yuuei classes definitely live up to their name," he says.

They continue along the path leading up to the school.

"I wonder how much of the material we're learning now is going to be on the end-of-term exams? Will the things we learn the day before be on the test? Urgh, just thinking about it is making me feel queasy," Uraraka worries and wraps her arms around her stomach.

"I don't think Mr. Aizawa would be that cruel…" Izuku trails off. "Well, actually, he might. I mean, considering how he tested us all in the beginning of the year. And all of our teachers, except for Present Mic, really like pop quizzes. There is also the physical portion of the exam too—"

"Deku, you're making me feel worse," Uraraka cuts him off, gripping her stomach harder.

Izuku's eyes widen as he straightens up, waving his hands around awkwardly.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to! I mean, you heard at lunch—everyone says the physical exam is a repeat of the entrance exam, and you did amazing. I would've failed if it wasn't for you. I'm probably the one who's going to fail, haha! Ha. Oh. I'm going to fail," he rambles, nearly falling into despair himself.

Uraraka shakes her head furiously.

"Begone evil energy! We're both going to pass. Say it with me!"

"We're both going to pass!" they shout near the school entrance doors, garnering confused and annoyed looks from passersby.

They look at each other. Uraraka standing hunched over and clutching her stomach, looking as if she will puke any second now. And Izuku who is trying to smile in the face of despair, his fists pumped in the air in a show of confidence, and breathing a little too heavily.

She breaks first.

"Look at your face!" she bursts into laughter, falling into a shaky squat and smacking her hands into the ground to steady herself.

Izuku cannot help but be infected by her laughter, doubling over himself.

"Sorry," he barely gets out, not even sure why he is apologizing.

She wipes the tears away, taking the hand Izuku holds out and popping back up with a shaky smile.

"Psyching ourselves out a whole month before the test… We're ridiculous," she huffs, shaking her head.

"Just a little bit," he replies with a shy smile.

She smiles back, and they continue towards their classroom. Izuku has probably thought this a million times, but he is so grateful to have Uraraka as a friend. She has a certain kind of optimism and determination that Todoroki nor Iida have. One that radiates from her and uplifts those around her. He wishes he could be more like her. These are the types of qualities a hero should have.

"Oh!" Izuku exclaims. "I wanted to pick your brain now that I have you. I mean, I don't have you —that's a weird statement—well, so is 'pick your brain,' but that's really not the point. You're an amazing person. You've helped me constantly, and people gravitate to you and everything. You must have tons of friends."

Uraraka cocks her head to the side, bewilderment on her face.

"Hmm…" she hums as they walk past the empty first-year classrooms of the Support Department. The students are always in the garage until the last minute. "I wouldn't say I have a *ton* of friends, but the ones I do have I love very much. Why?"

Izuku fiddles with straps of his backpack.

"Have you ever had to confront a—*ack*!" Izuku stumbles as his backpack is yanked backwards. He most definitely stepped on Uraraka's foot.

"Wha?" he starts to say, but she smooshes a finger to his lips and points into an open classroom door with two students occupying it.

His eyes widen when he realizes just which two students are there.

"Sorry for manhandling you," Uraraka whispers barely audible words as they hide and peer into the room. "But Bakugou and Iida? The little Mina on my shoulder told me not to miss this."

Almost like a spell, Ashido's name floats from one conversation to another.

"So, you're the reason Ashido's getting on my nerves," Kacchan accuses. He leans against the whiteboard, sipping what looks like one of the protein shakes Kirishima likes to bring in every morning.

Iida rolls his shoulders back to stand taller.

"I was reminding her, Kirishima, and Jirou that their behavior is not permissible as students representing Yuuei. I do not know what reasons you're referring to, but if she was apologizing for her actions, then they were appropriate," he explains in a steady voice.

"Huh." Kacchan sips his drink before pulling the travel cup away to stare incredulously at it. Almost as if it is better than he expected.

"I vaguely remember Asui started something on the bus to the practical training arena. You didn't make her apologize. Oh, and Kaminari called me a piece of shit. That really hurt my *feelings*," Kacchan complains sarcastically. He levels Iida with a dry look. "I don't need brats sobbing at me about being disliked."

The class president's shoulders sag a bit.

"R-right…" Iida trails off to swallowing audibly. "It's just that—"

“Don’t tell me you’re next.”

“Bakugou. *Please*.”

They stare at each other, and Kacchan frowns. He squats, balancing on his toes, and sips his drink.

“Shoot.”

Iida takes a moment to figure out his exact words. Well, not really. It is Iida he is talking about. Izuku reckons he already knows exactly what he wants to say, but he is having trouble saying it.

“I may have… overreacted… more for a personal reason rather than what actually transpired. I apologize for that. I was also quite rude to you before when I didn’t understand your actions when the villains attacked our class. I am embarrassed to say I was at war with my duties as Class President and my harsh judgement of you, Bakugou, and for that, I apologize. I despised your presence in our class because it questioned my meaning of a true hero. We are both heroes in training, and I couldn’t believe it. But over this field internship, I… think I understand you a bit more, and I should’ve never been so hostile towards a fellow classmate. I am sincerely sorry.”

Iida bows deeply. And because he faced the ground, he missed the scrutinizing look Kacchan threw his way, only for a second. He sighs, rising from his position.

“Stand straight, Class Pres,” Bakugou says. “A little glaring never hurt anyone. Don’t lose sleep over it.”

“But all those thoughts—”

“I can’t read your mind,” Bakugou says with a raise of his eyebrow. “I can tell you all my *happy* thoughts to make you feel better.”

“But—”

“Stop feeling guilty over something you didn’t do.”

“Right. Yes. I suppose.”

Uraraka and he scurry into the next class over to hide as their classmates exit the classroom together.

“This was actually good.”

“I think Kirishima would be happy to hear.”

“Pass.”

“Bakugou…” Iida’s chiding voice trails off as they turn a corner.

·_·_·

Izuku returns to clear skies and water. But he is alone with his rainbow of lights.

·_·_·

The hefty man laughs. And Izuku means *loudly*.

“It’s just an imposter guys. It’s cool,” he says, turning back to the cash register and shoving money into his drawstring bag. His friends return to raiding the convenience store, grabbing anything that catches their eyes.

Izuku noticed the broken glass of the store’s window and the lack of alarm bells ringing. The store was dark, but the light of the drinks refrigerators dimly illuminated three people briskly walking past them. A quiet robbery on a barren street.

He wanted to wait. The plan these past couple of attempts at vigilantism is to wait for Ground Zero to show up. But he never can. He was not built to stand idly by when someone is in trouble. And each person says the same thing.

Izuku has no clue how they figure it out so fast. He is not *that* much shorter than Kacchan. He bought the exact same hoodie, and he already owned the same black face mask. So how do they know he is an impersonator?

Izuku clears his throat awkwardly, standing a little taller and balling his hands into fists.

“I’m going to have to ask you to stop robbing this store. Please,” he says, instantly cringing at his words. Why in the world is he minding his manners?

Someone snorts, and the entire store erupts in laughter.

“Please!” the shorter man mocks, leaning onto the counter to find purchase.

“I’m crying! He said, ‘please!’” the woman giggles by the assorted chips.

“This is someone’s livelihood. You can’t rob them,” Izuku tries again.

“Dude,” the shorter man sighs. “You must be new. Just so you know, Dead Zero was a scary guy not a talker.”

“Why don’t you run along now before you get hurt? You’re so cute with this, I don’t want Oki to beat you up,” Izuku hears the woman say in a patronizing tone, but he has not turned from the shorter man whose words run ice through his veins.

‘Is Kacchan alive?’

“He isn’t dead,” Izuku states in an even tone.

“Oh, for the love of—” the hefty man rounds the cashier’s counter, dropping the bag of money and stalking towards Izuku. “Take a fucking hint, you dumb shit.”

“Oki, calm down! He’s harmless,” the woman tries.

The man, Oki, ignores her and makes a grab for his hoodie. Izuku ducks. He feels the crackle of One-For-All thread into his strength and fuel this emotion buzzing inside his body, and he swipes Oki’s feet out from under him. The man crashes into a display of cans, floundering out of shock.

“You’re dead!” he shouts, scrambling to his feet.

But before he can get his bearings, Izuku grabs the man by his shirt and chucks him over his shoulder and through the broken window.

“Holy shit!”

Oki skirts against the pavement of the sidewalk, rolling into the street. He grabs at his shoulder and curls in on himself. It could be dislocated. Izuku turns to the two accomplices. His skin is buzzing.

“Can you return the money you took from the cash register, *please*?”

The woman makes a last ditch effort, dashing for the drawstring bag Oki dropped, but Izuku grabs her arm firmly, stopping her in her tracks.

“Wait!” the shorter man exclaims, raising his hands in surrender. “Don’t hurt her. I’m putting it back, see?”

Izuku nods stiltedly.

“Call the police too.”

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Izuku thought it was a good plan. If he wants Kacchan to admit his secrets, then he needs to trap him. He needs to make sure Kacchan cannot weasel his way out of it in any way. Therefore, confronting him when he is Ground Zero is the best course of action. Kacchan has been masquerading as Ground Zero for over a year. If he did not stop after the Night Stalker incidents or the Build-A-Beaver Workshop scandal, Izuku doubts he will stop after the events that occurred in Yokohama. Ground Zero will return, and Izuku will be there to catch him in the act.

But it has been three failed attempts so far.

Everyone is convinced Ground Zero died that fateful night in Yokohama. And as a result, an influx of Ground Zero impersonators rose from the ashes to take his place. Somehow, people think it is their responsibility to keep the memory of him alive, even if it means putting themselves in harm’s way.

It is going as well as one thinks. Horribly! The impersonators are not heroes. They are not trained to use their quirks, and most of them refuse to do so to be like Ground Zero. They do not know how to aid an injured person or de-escalate a dangerous situation. They are fans, and they are a danger to themselves.

As much as he hates the idea of his childhood friend destroying his chances as a pro hero, a small part of him wants Ground Zero to quickly return, if only to safely put the impersonators to bed.

Izuku sighs heavily, his shoulders sagging a bit. This whole ordeal, the weird reoccurring dreams, the weirder dream, All Might’s new training regime, and studying for the end-of-term exams? The stress of it all is making him more exhausted than All Might’s 10-month beach cleaning and training.

Someone taps his shoulder just after Mr. Aizawa dismisses the class for lunch.

“Hm? Oh, hey, Tokoyami. Is there anything I can do for you?” he says, masking his weary voice with cheerfulness.

His classmate looks stiff and unsure, absentmindedly picking at the skin around his thumbs.

“Can I talk to you? Alone?” Tokoyami nearly whispers.

Izuku stands up immediately, feeling more alert.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, this is about a… mutual interest.”

Tokoyami flips up the collar of his shirt.

Izuku quickly scans the classroom. Most of his classmates have already hurried to lunch. Ashido and Kirishima already manhandled a grumpy Kacchan out the door. Uraraka, Iida, and Todoroki are talking conversationally at the door, waiting for Izuku, he supposes.

He swallows the building tension to pull on a quick smile.

“Uh, guys, I’ll meet you in the cafeteria!” Izuku calls towards his friends.

“Oh, are you sure? Are you two okay?” Uraraka asks, cutting off her reply to Iida.

“Yep!” Izuku chirps back, wincing at his voice.

“Hm. All right. But don’t loiter for long, or you won’t digest your lunch in time for fifth period,” Iida warns them before they leave.

Izuku waits a minute after everyone has left but them. His mouth twitches.

“A mutual interest,” he repeats.

Izuku scrutinizes the small, decorative pin with the initials, “GZ,” inscribed on it, unveiled on the underside of Tokoyami’s shirt collar.

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